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The construction of a common identity through online discourse: a socio-cultural study of a virtual community

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The construction of a common identity through online discourse: a socio-cultural study of a virtual community

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A thesis submitted for the degree of PhD

The University of Bath

Department of Psychology

Carlo Perrotta

December 2009

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Carlo Perrotta

*It is not at all an idle matter trying to define
what a human being is.*

Primo Levi
Other People's Trades
Summit Books 1989

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Note: this thesis includes a cd-rom with the original unformatted data analysed in the empirical sections

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Abstract

This thesis investigates the relationship between identity and discourse in a networked collaborative environment in order to explore the following question:

Is the construction of a common identity taking place?

The research question draws on the socio-cultural theory and, in particular, on the view according to which the development of a common identity is an important dimension of learning. More specifically, the thesis builds upon recent criticism attracted by the socio-cultural notion of “Community of Practice” for its inadequate account of the relationship between identity, language and practice, both in traditional and computer-mediated settings. The empirical section of the thesis reports a study which applies the concept of recognition work developed by James Gee to the discursive dynamics identified in a “discussion room” of an Italian online community of young psychologists and psychology students. In the study, discourse analysis was carried out on 20 online discussions and on 23 semi-structured interviews.

The findings demonstrate that the notion of recognition work can be used to study how identities are constructed and negotiated through discourse, and provide an additional insight into the role of computer-mediated communication in the relationship between identity and learning. The findings also have theoretical implications, raising the question as to whether the emphasis on communities of practice has exhausted its possible contributions to a socio-cultural theory of learning. Additionally, the thesis also considers the implications for the design of virtual learning environments that try to foster collaborative learning through networked discourse.

Introduction

How do we become who we are? What are the actions that define our identities as members of society? These are increasingly popular questions among educational researchers, in particular those interested in informal and “life-long” learning (see Bransford et al., 2006; Fowler & Mayes, 1999; Gee, 2001). The concept of life-long learning refers to economic and cultural changes in the globalised world, which made necessary for people to embark on a never-ending learning journey in order to be “employable” throughout their working lives. This view of learning replaces traditional topics and disciplines with pragmatic and experiential approaches (Beck, 1992), and views “work” as a fundamental dimension, symbolising a positive and constructive participation in society: “The importance that work has acquired in industrial society has no parallels in history” (Beck, 1992, p. 139).

In a classic paper, Scribner and Cole (1973) already noted that experiential and informal learning is person-oriented. It puts individuals (and the groups they belong to) at the very heart of the learning process, basing expectations of performance on who a person is and how her/his emotional and existential engagement regulates the construction and the acquisition of knowledge. Knowledge, in other words, becomes inseparable from learners’ identities and from the process through which these are formed.

Another interesting, if narrower and more specific, question could be: do we engage in such “acts of becoming” also on the internet? Many have tried to provide an answer (see Nakamura, 2002; Turkle, 1995), by focusing on how the specific nature of computer-mediated communication influences expressive possibilities and relationship management. However few have approached the question from an educational perspective. Lipponen (2002), discussing the theoretical foundations of the relatively young field of Computer-Supported Collaborative Learning (CSCL), noted that “Knowledge is not all that is constructed but also humans and their identities are constructions (...). This ontological line of research should be considered also more in CSCL” (Lipponen, 2002, p.74).

Packer and Goicoechea (2000) observed that both cognitive constructivism and socio-cultural theory - the two main trends in learning research, both in traditional and “computer-supported” settings - have very specific “ontologies”: they make assumptions

about the nature of “being”, “what it is, what exists, what it means for something, or somebody, to be” (Packer & Goicoechea, 2000, p. 227). However, such assumptions go usually unnoticed, due “in part to their relatively unarticulated character, and in part to a lingering anxiety, traceable to the logical positivists, that a discussion of ontology is merely “metaphysical”, untestable, and therefore unscientific or even meaningless” (Packer & Goicoechea, 2000, pp. 227-228).

Packer and Goicoechea’s critique of the socio-cultural theory in terms of “untapped ontological potential” is particularly relevant in the context of this thesis. They argue that the socio-cultural approach is only superficially aware of the ontological implications of learning, and that although expressions like “identity change” and “construction of a group identity” do appear often in the sociocultural literature, they are often hindered by a substantial lack of clarity. This is regretful, because at the basis of the sociocultural approach lies a non-dualist ontology which, rejecting the separation between knower and known, could be the real springboard for an empirically grounded “ontological learning”.

In this thesis I share Packer and Goicoechea’s general objective of reintroducing “ontology as a valid, meaningful and necessary topic in research on learning and development” (Packer & Goicoechea, 2000, p. 228). The empirical section will focus on a networked collaborative environment, exploring the role of Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) in the process of identity construction. I believe that an ontological perspective in learning, based on the study of the processes that allow individuals and groups to enrich or renegotiate some aspects of their identities, can widen considerably the scope of definitions such as “knowledge creation” or “knowledge building”. In my attempt to contribute to the above-mentioned objective, I draw mostly on the socio-cultural literature and in particular on the concept of Community of Practice (CoP) (Lave & Wenger 1991; Wenger; 1998). This concept represents a central idea in the more general situated learning approach and it has been adapted to a considerably wide range of research fields, including the study of virtual learning communities.

As noted by Lea (2005), the concept of community of practice was originally devised as a useful heuristic tool to draw attention on the lived-in-the-world dimension of learning and on the importance of *meanings and identities* negotiated through engagement in social, informal practices. Further developments turned the CoP notion into a fully fledged educational model, ubiquitous and fairly prescriptive (Hiltbreth et al., 2000; Rogers, 2000; Wenger et al., 2002), applicable to contexts as varied as corporate team building and e-learning courses. Despite its success, it is argued in this thesis that the CoP notion needs some radical revision, which can be achieved through a better understanding of the role of language and discourse in the process of identity construction.

Research question

The aim of the thesis is to study the relationship between identity, practice and language in a networked collaborative environment in order to answer the following question:

Is the construction of a common identity taking place?

This fairly straightforward question is motivated by the awareness that a general lack of clarity left a crucial aspect of the socio-cultural learning theory mostly under-researched. Assuming that identity is central from a socio-cultural perspective, and that the development of a common identity is often considered as the driving force behind participation in a learning community, can we demonstrate whether this is actually occurring in a specific context? Furthermore, the thesis also attempts to investigate the role of computer-mediated communication in the relationship between identity and learning.

Outline of the thesis

The eight chapters of the thesis reflect a canonical organisation. The first chapter describes the theoretical contributions that helped introduce the role of culture and society in learning, exploring in particular the conceptual bond between culturally situated practices and socially constructed identities. This bond represents the theoretical foundation upon which the notion of community of practice is built. The chapter continues with an in-depth discussion about CoPs, exploring influential contributions (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) and the empirical evidence currently available. The chapter's main argument draws on recent criticism attracted by the CoP notion for the inadequacies in the way it accounts for the relationship between identity, language and practice (Barton & Tusting, 2005).

The second chapter provides a specific insight into the notion of identity, in particular in relation to disciplinary identity, illustrating how subjectivity is often articulated at the semiotic intersection between different contexts of discourse and practice, some of which may be online, some offline. This chapter puts particular emphasis on the transition from novice to expert that clearly emerged as an arena of identity development in the course of the literature review; furthermore, it also reviews more approaches to identity construction and maintenance in online settings.

The third chapter narrows down the theoretical background, providing an overview of the research on learning through the use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT). The chapter explores in particular the application of the concept of community of

practice to online collaborative environments, arguing that the relationship between identity, language and practice appears to be particularly problematic and unaccounted for when studying “online CoPs” based on textual, discursive interactions. This criticism represents the theoretical rationale that justifies the empirical project and the underlying research question.

The fourth chapter introduces the methodology. The discussion in it draws on the issues already noted in the previous theoretical chapters, which now lead to consider discourse analysis as the most appropriate method to answer the research question. Discourse analysis is not only described as a methodological framework, but also as an extremely rich theoretical perspective that could account for the relationship between identity, practice and language in an online collaborative environment. Several approaches, including computer-mediated discourse analysis, are explored before focusing on one specific model (Gee, 1996, 1999, 2000), deemed as the most suited due to its emphasis on identity in education and learning. In particular, Gee’s notion of *recognition work* (1999) is described as an interpretive device that could help analyse the construction of a common identity through discourse. Recognition work refers to the behaviour through which identities are *actively and willingly* formed and negotiated, in order to be made visible and recognisable.

The fifth chapter marks the separation between the introduction and the empirical section of the thesis. Its aim is to tackle the research question directly, by analysing the discourse occurring naturally in an online collaborative environment in order to understand whether a common identity is being constructed. The research context, a discussion room within an online forum of psychology students and young professionals, is introduced and described. The chapter provides an account of the preliminary phases of the research, which were concerned with securing access to the online environment and defining the analytic and coding procedures, as well as clarifying step-by-step the analytic process that led to the identification of the analytic categories within the data. The chapter continues with a report of the first study, based on 20 randomly selected asynchronous discussions (out of 275). The analysis succeeds in demonstrating that participants in the online discussions engage in a reflective discursive practice in order to achieve a specific mutual recognition. The evidence suggests that this “recognition work” results into a common identity as “young psychologists”, which is represented in the discussions as peripheral, with confused boundaries and lacking social recognition and power.

The aim of the sixth chapter is to triangulate the first study’s findings, carrying out a focused exploration of the “young psychologists’ identity” which emerged from the online discussions. The chapter reports 23 semi-structured interviews conducted with volunteer

members of the discussion room. The interviews confirm the main characteristics of the “young psychologists’ identity” but they also highlight other interesting aspects, namely the connections made by respondents with the “off-line” dimension, where they keenly engage in a number of activities to complement and enrich the identity constructed online. The chapter shows how the relationship between practices, language and identity is articulated across the “virtual” and the “real” dimensions. Furthermore, the chapter provides insights into the role of the interviewer in managing or directing the conversation, providing an example of how interviewees and interviewer work to construct themselves as certain types of people in relation to the topic of the interview and, reflexively, the interview itself.

The seventh chapter returns to the data analysed in chapter 5 (the online asynchronous discussions), focusing on the role of CMC in the process of identity construction through discourse. The chapter describes data extracts in which CMC helps create a symbolic, reflective space. In this space the relationship between problematic or relevant aspects of different identities (like “being a mother” and “being a psychologist”) can be explored in a collaborative dialogue. The concepts of “C-conversation” (Gee, 1999) and “intertextuality” (Bakhtin, 1986; Kristeva, 1980) are used to explain this process of mutual exchange and dialogue. The chapter suggests that these notions could be used as pedagogical principles capable of reconciling knowledge construction and identity formation in a consistent educational framework. CMC would play an important part in this “intertextual pedagogy” due to the ease with which it facilitates the coordination and the interconnection of the different aspects that constitute ideas, discourses and identities.

The eighth, and last, chapter provides a summary of the thesis drawing some conclusions and exploring the contribution of the thesis to research on networked learning environments. The chapter discusses the problems encountered in the empirical study, highlighting and seeking to address the issues of credibility and representativeness usually associated to qualitative methods. Furthermore, the theoretical issues of the CoP model are the objects of a problematising discussion that builds on the empirical work presented during the course of the thesis. The chapter raises questions as to whether the emphasis on CoPs has exhausted its possible contributions to a socio-cultural theory of learning, and whether other notions like networked learning (Steeple & Jones, 2002) and networks of practice (Brown & Duguid, 2001; Duguid, 2005) could account better for the relationship between collaborative learning, discourse, identity and networking technologies. The chapter also considers the implications for the design of virtual learning environments that try to foster professional development through networked discourse.

1. The socio-cultural approach

The aim of this thesis is to analyse the relationship between discourse, learning and identity in a networked context. In this chapter I will discuss the theoretical background, beginning with a general overview of the socio-cultural approach. The chapter will introduce the basic contributions that brought culture and society to the forefront of contemporary research about learning, and will describe the main focus of analysis in the socio-cultural approach: the notion of culturally mediated activity. This notion will be explored by highlighting the relationship between activity, symbolic exchanges and identity formation, gradually narrowing down to the theoretical issues and debates that informed the empirical section of the thesis.

The chapter's main argument will be based on a critical discussion about the concept of Community of Practice (CoP), which has influenced a great deal of research in traditional learning settings and in networked ones. However, the current literature about CoPs does not shed enough light on some problematic aspects which ultimately led to the research question explored in the thesis (is the construction of a common identity taking place in a specific online collaborative environment?). Learning in a CoP is viewed as increasing participation in the activities of a community and, most importantly, as identity construction. The concept of community of practice is based on the idea that engagement in actual practices is what drives the process of learning, while language is seen as either a form of performative practice in its own right, or as unproblematic information exchange. This thesis, on the other hand, favours a non-dualist view according to which language and practices need to be seen as part of the same unified discursive, and constructive, process.

1.1 The socio-cultural approach: a general overview

The socio-cultural approach is a truly interdisciplinary perspective born, according to Wertsch (1995), out of the necessity to deal with changes and transformations in the globalised world. Wertsch (ibid) noted that traditional disciplinary boundaries in the human

and social sciences forced researchers to organise their inquiry into specific areas of competence, in such a way that is nearly impossible for these disciplines to communicate with each other or “to formulate integrative pictures of complex phenomena” (Wertsch, 1995, p. 3). Psychology, anthropology, linguistics, history, sociology and so on; all describe and explain their objects of study using different languages, to the extent that it is extremely difficult to translate an account from one of these languages into another.

The socio-cultural approach attempts to address this “incommunicability” affecting the human and social sciences, contributing to the development of a common language. Such an ambitious attempt goes beyond learning, and reaches in the idea of human development as a socio-cultural process some of its most accomplished articulations.

The theoretical roots of the socio-cultural approach dig relatively deep into the history of the human sciences. For example, Dewey (1938-1950) was the first to use the term “socio-cultural” when discussing issues of logic and inquiry, and Wundt (1921), the universally acknowledged “father of psychology”, claimed that the study of human social life represents “the higher task of psychology, and truly its proper completion” (1920, p. 201, as quoted in Jahoda, 1993, p. 133). Anthropology and cultural studies also played an important role in defining much of the theoretical and methodological assumptions underlying the socio-cultural framework. Bruner (1990) offered a valid formulation of, and a precise objective for, “cultural psychology”, suggesting that such a discipline should challenge the view of culture as an epiphenomenon of biologically determined human nature, in which the *causes* of human behaviour lie in the biological substrate. Bruner argued that “culture and the quest for meaning within culture are the proper causes of human action” (Bruner, 1990, p. 20).

1.1.1 The influence of Vygotsky

When discussing the antecedents of the socio-cultural approach, a particular emphasis should be put on the work of Lev Vygotsky. Vygotsky (1962) was very critical of the idea that development is the result of innate, biological predispositions and wanted to discover the “actual relations of the developmental process of learning capabilities” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 85). In order to do this, he differentiated between two developmental levels: the “actual” level and the zone of proximal development. The actual developmental level is the level of the child’s mental functions resulting from already completed development and it corresponds to her mental age. Although the actual level may be used as a criterion to evaluate individual mental development, Vygotsky thought that what children do with the

assistance of others might be an even better indication. This led him to the identification of a “zone of proximal development”, defined as

“the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem-solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem-solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86).

Vygotsky’s developmental theory focuses on collaboration, rather than the independent learner, and on the potential capabilities of a child, rather than what is achieved in isolated evaluation tests; his idea of learning presupposes a rich and complex social world in which children are supported by those around them in order to undertake tasks within the zone of proximal development.

1.1.2 The theme of cultural mediation

According to Vygotsky, the social context mediates developmental processes at two levels. In the first place, there is the contingent dimension where learning takes place, that is, the specific situations in which the interaction with more experienced others or peers supports development. Secondly, the wider socio-cultural history provides the tools and the practices that mediate the relationship between learners and the objects of their learning; these tools include language, writing, maths, calculating devices and so on. The theme of cultural mediation had a great influence on the socio-cultural approach, defining its most basic assumptions about the relationship between individual and social context.

However, Wertsch (1995) reminds us that Vygotsky’s position was clearly in line with the universalist assumptions about the psychic unity of the social mind (i.e., the social mind is inherently the same regardless of cultural differences) and evolutionist claims often associated with these assumptions. The current perspective favours instead a more relativistic position, viewing the human mind “as we know it” not as a universal human feature but as the result of specific cultural influences. This is the reason why the term *socio-cultural* (never actually used by Vygotsky) is preferred in the current literature to Vygotskian definitions such as *sociohistorical* and *cultural historical*.

Key to understanding the notion of mediation is the idea that humans can access the world only indirectly using cultural tools and artefacts. The relationship between these tools and artefacts and mental functioning is never linear and mechanistic, but always circular and mutually defining. Cultural tools have an impact only when individuals actively

use them in their everyday lives, but once the tool is included in the behavioural process, it exercises a powerful transformative influence, altering behaviour itself in a dynamic process of mutual adaptation.

Olson (1995) pointed out that mediational tools emerge and develop independently from mental functioning, and that they are seldom created to accommodate the way the human mind works. His analysis of the relationship between writing and mental development from a Vygotskian perspective is a good example that shows how cultural, historical and institutional settings shape mediating tools. Using evidence derived from comparative studies of different linguistic systems in Indo-European cultures, Olson suggested that history (or more specifically, *people* in history) created writing not as a reaction to internal cognitive development but to deal with pragmatic, everyday communicative problems. Subsequently, writing as a cultural tool transformed the way we think about language, and the way the mind works in a more general sense, to the extent that the way we articulate our thought processes nowadays is inextricably bound to the way writing has evolved throughout the history of mankind.

“writing adds a new type of structure to the world and in coming to use that structure, that is, in reading and writing, learners learn (...) a model for thinking” (Olson, 1995, p. 97).

The importance of cultural mediation in Vygotsky’s work, and its influence on later theorists, cannot be underestimated. The idea that our relationship with the world is mediated by physical and symbolic tools (e.g., language and writing) represents the very soul of the socio-cultural approach and has inspired the identification of a fairly specific focus of analysis, as we will see in the next section.

1.1.3 The focus of analysis in the socio-cultural approach

Socio-cultural theorists tried to re-conceptualise human development from a wide perspective, encompassing the influence of social and cultural contexts in mental functioning. However, an overly radical shift on the contextual dimension could have overshadowed the role of agency as a catalyst of behaviour, to focus instead on macro-societal structures like “culture” and “ideology”, somewhat detached from the lived experience in actual situations. An increasing awareness of this risk led to an interest in the scope and the variations of culturally informed human activities in *situated* contexts. This interest in activity conceals a desire to “emancipate” mental functioning from the

determining influences of objectified macro-social structures on the one hand, and individual, behind-the-scenes, de-contextualised explanatory devices (e.g., cognitive structures) on the other.

Activity, in other words, is used in the socio-cultural approach as a middle-level construct, the result of a balancing act between humanism and sociologism. Wertsch (1995) argued that the debate between humanism and sociologism cannot be resolved on a rational level because it is not grounded in empirical fact or logic, but embedded in fundamental ethical and political issues in modern society: the antinomy between individual and society. In this regard, he proposed that

“Mental functioning and socio-cultural setting should be understood as dialectically interacting moments, or aspects of a more inclusive unit of analysis – *human action*. As understood here, action is not carried out either by the individual or by society, although there are individual and societal moments to any action. For related reasons, an account of action cannot be derived from the study of mental functioning or socio-cultural setting in isolation. Instead, action provides a context within which the individual and society (as well as mental functioning and socio-cultural context) are understood as interrelated moments.” (Wertsch, 1995, p. 60).

The socio-cultural emphasis on activity draws on a number of influential sources:

Bakhtin's (1986) notion of utterance as a form of action, Mead's (1974) philosophy of the act, Bourdieu's (1977) notion of practice and, in particular, Leont'ev's (1978) theory of activity, which was heavily influenced by Vygotsky's (1981) culturally mediated action. As mentioned in the previous section, Vygotsky's idea of mediated action was based on the assumption that once mediational tools such as language are introduced into the flow of action, they lead to a radical redefinition of that action. In this new type of act, the mediational tools, the people using them and the action's specific object are entangled in a mutually influencing relationship, and may not be studied in isolation. This relationship is usually represented graphically in the popular “triangle of action” (see Engeström, 2001):

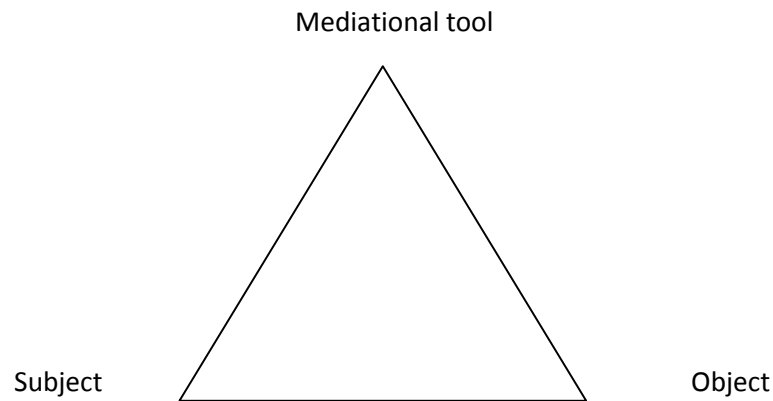


Fig. 1.1: Vygotsky's model of mediated action (from Engeström, 2001, p.134)

In this model, the line between subject and object refers to unmediated action, that is, to the direct, immediate relationship between sensory experience and the external world, e.g., when a child touches a pot of boiling water for the first time, and immediately associates her action with the sudden experience of heat and pain (Baker et al., 1999). The introduction of the mediational tool, on the other hand, redefines the interaction between subject and object in terms of meaningful understanding. For instance, the child could use a thermometer to measure the temperature of the water; the use of this new mediational tools implies understanding of the semiotic implications of her action, because in order to properly use the thermometer, the child needs to be able to grasp notions like “boiling” and “temperature”, which work like additional mediational tools that transform the relationship with the object.

Leont'ev (1978) significantly expanded on Vygotsky's insights, explicitly acknowledging that cognition cannot exist outside of the life process which is, in its very nature, a material and practical process. Drawing on Marx's sociological lessons, Leont'ev offered one of the best definitions of activity, highlighting its transformative role and its dramatic importance for psychology:

“(…) even the bodily organisation of individuals incorporates the need that they participate in an active relationship with the external world; in order to exist they must act, produce the necessary means of life. Acting on the external world, they change it; at the same time they also change

themselves. This is because what they themselves represent is determined by their activity, conditioned by the already attained level of development, by its means and the form of its organisation.” (Leont’ev, 1978, p.13).

Leont’ev’s words describe a complex transformative relationship between human agents and society. The notion of activity reframes human behaviour into a mediated relationship between the individual and the context. As such, it represents the perfect focus of analysis from a socio-cultural perspective. Similarly, in the empirical section of this thesis the focus of analysis is neither the individual nor the social context, but “discourse”, seen as a shared, symbolic, and transformative practice. However, we will see later in this chapter that the relationship between discourse and practice raises some questions, which will be the object of a more detailed discussion. For the time being, I wish to draw attention to the genesis of human activity and its internal structure, in order to articulate a clearer picture of this fundamental notion in the socio-cultural approach.

1.1.4 The origin and structure of activity

Concepts like activity and practice are not new in philosophy; in fact, they can be traced back to Aristotle’s teachings long before becoming theoretical pillars in the Marxist and post-Marxist schools of thought, and finding their way to contemporary social theories of learning. In many ways the Aristotelian analysis is still the necessary yardstick against which all subsequent attempts are judged. Aristotle (1985, see also Arendt, 1958) noted that human activity can be divided into two different forms: Poiesis, which is the “making”, i.e. the production process (or work) distinct from its agent, and Praxis, which is “doing” in accordance to the rational choice of actions to be undertaken (Proairesis). While Poiesis is concerned with the production of a specific outcome, and in that outcome it accomplishes itself; Praxis finds in doing its own end, it is concerned with individual aims, social purposes, collective ideals and, therefore, with *meaning*. Marx’s concept of Praxis (Marx & Engels, 1970) drew on Aristotle’s one by emphasising the historical and dialectical dynamics that enable individuals to overcome the limits of production (Poiesis), laying the foundations for social change and development.

According to Leont’ev (1978), activity also originated in the social process of material production, which is always directed towards an object. Activity without an object is meaningless, and the empirical study of activity involves discovering its object in the first place. Leont’ev discussed the issues of emotional states as drives, exploring in particular the primacy of physiological needs. He suggested that a need in itself does not have any

structuring power on activity, but it can only activate the biological functions in terms of arousal. Only when a need meets an object it becomes capable of directing and regulating activity. The need is “filled with content” (Leont’ev, 1978, p. 54) derived from the surrounding world.

In Leont’ev’s theory, object-oriented activity represents the higher level of a tripartite model, including also actions and operations. This model is based on the assumption that the collective processes which have emerged throughout history have made the systematic organisation of social relationships necessary. According to Leont’ev, activities can be studied focusing on the specific actions used to carry them out, and each action is defined by a specific goal that serves the general, higher order motive of the activity, but is independent from it. Leont’ev used the following example (alongside others) to illustrate the relationship between actions and activities:

“Let us suppose that the activity of a man is aroused by food; this also constitutes its motive. For satisfying the need of food, however, he must carry out actions that are not aimed directly at getting food. For example, the purpose of a given individual may be preparing equipment for fishing; regardless of whether he himself will use the equipment he has prepared in the future or give it to others and obtain part of the total catch.” (Leont’ev, 1978, p. 63).

In addition, Leont’ev suggested that actions have not only an intentional aspect or purpose (what must be achieved), they have also an operational aspect (how and by what means this can be achieved), which is determined not by the goal in itself but by contingent, situational conditions. Therefore, even when the goal is the same, the operations through which this goal can be achieved can change depending on the objective conditions. For example, let us imagine that the goal of an action is to take apart a piece of wood in order to create a wardrobe (this would be the motive, and would therefore define an activity) (see Leont’ev, 1978). The piece of wood may be taken apart using different tools, each of which determines the operations to achieve the action’s goal. In certain conditions cutting would be more appropriate, in others sawing and so on: objective conditions inform the operations that allow actions to be carried out. Finally, it is important to highlight that Leont’ev’s model is not static but very dynamic: activities can lose motives and significance to become actions serving other activities; actions can acquire motives and significance, expanding and becoming activities; sometimes actions can also reverse into operations in order to realise other actions, and so on.

Leont'ev work has led Engeström (Engeström et al., 1999; Engeström, 2001) to view learning within the social context as a process of “expansion”. Engeström enlarged the basic model of mediated action, describing it as the “tip of the iceberg” (Engeström, 2001, p. 134). He integrated Leont'ev teachings into the “triangle of action” (fig.1.2) and suggested that human activity needs be understood by taking into account also shared rules (both individual and collective), the role of community and the division of labour (between individuals and between groups).

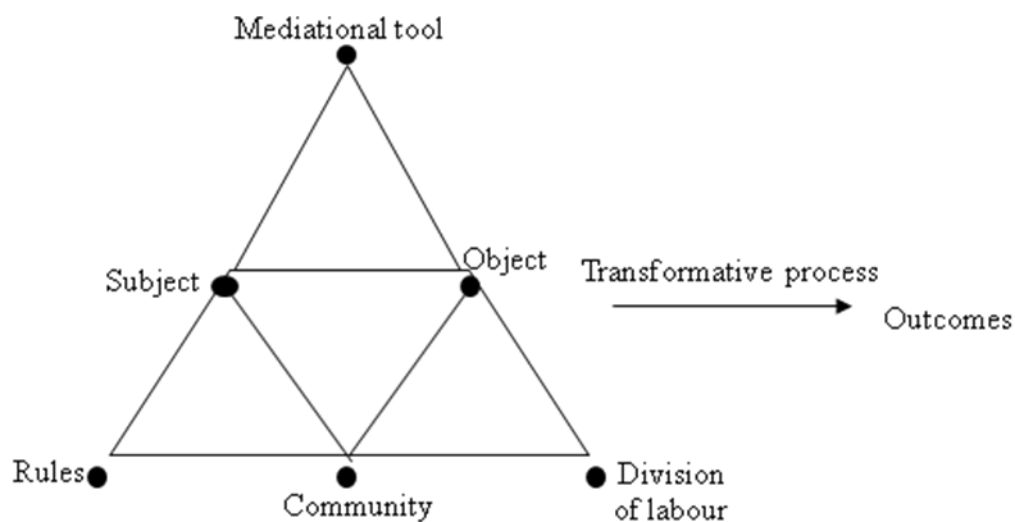


Fig. 1.2 Engeström's model of activity (Engeström, 1987, p. 78).

According to this model, rules inform individuals about the object of the activity, while “community” refers to the multi-voicedness of every collective system where people are joined up together to pursue a common endeavour, and where the division of labour regulates increasingly complex social relationships. The interaction between all these aspects is the precondition for an active process of transformation through which activities acquire meaning, generating learning outcomes that push the boundaries of the whole system forward in a process of “expansion”.

Engeström's “enlargement” reflects the many disciplinary influences that converged into the socio-cultural approach. Categories such as community, “multi-voicedness” and obviously division of labour traditionally belong to the languages of sociology, cultural

studies and anthropology, but they have been appropriated to generate a consistent and original framework for the study of learning and development. In the next section, I will once more emphasise the interdisciplinary nature of the socio-cultural approach, in order to draw attention to the specific area of interest in this thesis: the relationship between activity and subjectivity in specific contexts of mutual engagement (“communities”).

1.2 The relationship between activity and subjectivity

1.2.1 A psycho-social perspective

In this thesis, the foundations of the socio-cultural approach are further expanded beyond Vygotsky and Leont’ev’s views (and later interpretations) to include also a focus on the “ontogenetic” quality of activities, i.e. the fact that socio-cultural activities have a fundamental role in the formation of the subject. In this sense, a fundamental source of inspiration is represented by G.H. Mead’s studies about the social construction of the self. In his book *Mind, Self and Society*, Mead (1974) attempted to locate consciousness in the social process, suggesting that the concept of self depends on the “other” and on communication based on the “significant symbols” of language. From this perspective, subjectivity is not regarded as an entity inside people’s minds but as an emerging quality of social interaction, the result of an active process of construction carried out through meaningful *social actions*.

According to Gillespie (2005, p. 25), Mead devised a “feedback theory of consciousness”. In this theory, an actor receives feedback from others and gives feedback to others in a circular, consequential process through which the self can become conscious of his or her own actions. In order to illustrate how social acts enable us to take the attitude of the other, Gillespie (2005) used the example of a child playing football. A child kicking a ball may first hit the wall as if to score a goal, and then, as the ball rebounds, attempt to catch the ball assuming quickly the goalkeeper role. The sight of the wall calls out the attitude of the striker and the approaching ball calls out the attitude of the goalkeeper. Through such play the child enacts both the striker and the goalkeeper depending exclusively on what the situation requires, but without any form of self-awareness. According to Mead’s theory, if these two different states could both become integrated then the individual will become conscious of his or her actions in regard to a specific social act.

There are different mechanisms that allow this to happen, like the existence of rules that provide a clear and recognisable structure for the different roles in a football game.

However, the most powerful of these mechanisms is undoubtedly the interaction through significant symbols during an actual game. For example, the vocal gesture of another player calling “pass” seamlessly weaves together the different situations that define the social activity of playing football, helping the interchange of different positions on the pitch and, most importantly, making players conscious of this dynamic. According to Mead, the individual

"can enter as an object [to himself] only on the basis of social relations and interactions, only by means of her experiential transactions with other individuals in an organised social environment" (Mead, 1974, p. 225).

The emergence of the self is possible only when the individual attempts to view herself from the viewpoint of others. During the experience of play, the child learns how to internalise into a symbolised unity (“the generalised other”) all the rules associated with the different roles on the pitch. When she can view herself from the standpoint of this generalised other, she becomes conscious of herself.

1.2.2 A sociological perspective

Mead’s theory is based on a strong psychological standpoint and it does not fully account for the role of history and culture. However, the emphasis on the role of social interaction through symbolic exchanges provides a solid explanatory framework to understand how shared activities shape consciousness and subjectivity within micro-social settings. This framework can be integrated by a more “macro” perspective on the ontogenetic quality of activities, which focuses on wider systems and dynamics and their role in “constructing” identities. In this sense, the Marxist category of labour might be viewed as the prototypical instance.

Labour, according to Marx, not only creates “an object for the subject but also a subject for the object” (*Grundrisse*, quoted in Schivelbusch, 1987, p. 164).

Ludwig Fleck’s (1979, cited in Pickering, 2001) account of the establishment of the Wasserman reaction as a test for syphilis among serologists is a fascinating example that could help us grasp the relationship between a Marxist view of activity and socio-cultural learning.

At the end of the nineteenth century syphilis was a social and cultural phenomenon extending far beyond the domain of health. Its sexual nature (the “venereal disease”) had huge moral implications which contributed to its characterisation as the ultimate punishment for a dissolute life. In 1906, August Von Wasserman, Albert Neisser and Carl Bruck devised a serological test for diagnostic purposes. The Wasserman reaction, as it came to be known, was based on vague empirical foundations and it was not completely reliable in its results (Quétel, 1990). This test, however, did manage to prove that syphilis is a disease that can lie dormant without losing its contagious potential. The process that led to the development of the Wasserman reaction can be seen as a form of socio-cultural learning: the serologists shaped the reaction defining a shared practice, adding different reagents during a trial/error, collaborative process. At the same time, a specific “community” was formed: the community of those competent to carry out the Wasserman reaction. These serologists gained considerable social prestige from having a sort of “artistic” talent in orchestrating the different aspects of the test, and executing it as a performance. The Wasserman reaction was the practice object of the community, and the members of the community, with their peculiar socially constructed identity (the “Wasserman practitioners”), were the subjects.

A similar “macro” perspective on the ontogenetic role of activities was also adopted by poststructuralist authors who emphasised, once more, the role of symbolic interactions in order to analyse how institutional and professional practices influence the creation of specific subjectivities. For example, Foucault (1967-1989), probably the most prevalent amongst them, suggested that the “discourse” of psychiatry, which comprises linguistic styles, texts, specific behaviours and culturally informed beliefs, contributed to construct specific institutional identities for doctors and, in particular, for mentally ill people. In his book “Madness and Civilisation” (1967-1989) Foucault used historical evidence to show how the advent of psychiatry turned “mad people” from unpredictable figures living at the boundaries of society, into relatively integrated “patients” who began expressing symptoms and other behaviours, which were consistent with their new “sick” institutional identity.

The last two paragraphs in this chapter have drawn on different sources to gradually shift the focus from activity itself to the relations revolving around it. The aim is to start articulating a view of learning as meaningful participation in actual “communities”, accounting for the ontogenetic quality of socio-cultural practices *and* symbolic interactions. Through the notion of community it becomes possible to investigate practical object-oriented activity, alongside the interactions and the conflicts that characterise actual social contexts where people share important chunks of their existences. This shift is needed in order to explore the idea that learning is ultimately a process of “becoming”. The next

section will continue on this route through a more in-depth discussion of what links activity, community and identity; the resulting discussion will introduce the main argument of the thesis and the rationale behind the empirical study.

1.3 Communities of practice: Activities, communities and identities

Rogoff (Rogoff at al., 2001; Rogoff, 2003) described socio-cultural development in a “community of learners” as a dynamic process where the two main components, individual and society, continuously define and influence each other. Learning in a community can be understood, according to Rogoff, as a process of “enculturation”, where newcomers are gradually accepted and socialised through interaction with peers and more experienced members. A fundamental dimension of this process is the development of a *common identity*, a “membership” identity, through which individuals gradually move towards a more committed engagement. Enculturation is always rooted in specific, physically and symbolically “situated” contexts; in such contexts, learning occurs when socio-cultural activities are significant to the identities of those involved, that is, when they resonate with the “living” dimension of actual experience (what is relevant for whom). Lave and Wenger (1991) introduced a very popular definition for these types of situated contexts where people share significant experiences, and where learning takes place through increasing levels of engagement: *Communities of Practice* (CoPs).

“In our view, participation at multiple levels is entailed in membership in a *community of practice*. Nor does the term community imply necessarily co-presence, a well defined identifiable group, or socially visible boundaries. It does imply participation in an activity system about which participants share understandings concerning what they are doing and what that means in their lives and for their communities (...) a community of practice is a set of relations among persons, activity, and world, over time and in relation with other tangential and overlapping communities of practice. A community of practice is an intrinsic condition for the existence of knowledge, not least because it provides the interpretive support necessary for making sense of its heritage. Thus, participation in the cultural practice in which any knowledge exists is an epistemological principle of learning. The social structure of this practice, its power relations and its conditions for legitimacy define possibilities for learning.” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 98).

The key process underlying learning in a CoP is called “Legitimate Peripheral Participation” (LPP) (Lave & Wenger, 1991), which refers to the trajectory that goes from a marginal participation, characterised by accomplishing a short range of tasks with limited

responsibilities under the supervision of more experienced members (the “old-timers”), to a full membership and increased responsibilities. Notions of community, membership and identity became more and more relevant in the context of socio-cultural research, until Etienne Wenger, in his popular book “Communities of Practice: learning, meaning and identity” (1998), turned them into the centrepiece of a fully fledged and ambitious social theory of learning:

“The kind of social theory of learning I propose is not a replacement for other theories of learning that address different aspects of the problem. But it does have its own sets of assumptions and its own focus. Within this context, it does constitute a coherent level of analysis; it does yield a conceptual framework from which to derive a consistent set of general principles and recommendations for understanding and enabling learning”. (Wenger, 1998, p. 4).

In his book, Wenger formulated an ambitious model of social participation capable of accounting for the complex relationships between meaning, knowledge production and identity in all possible contexts of life. His idea of social participation does not only refer to situated engagement in specific activities, but also to the more general processes through which people become “active participants in the practices of social communities and construct identities in relation to these communities.” (Wenger, 1998, p. 4). According to Wenger, communities of practice represent a general interpretive notion for understanding how societies and individuals interact and change; he identified three constituting elements that define a CoP:

- the mutual engagement in shared sets of practices;
- a joint enterprise negotiated by the community members, a purpose and a sense of shared responsibility;
- a common repertoire of resources including tools, stories and the specific language used in the interactions amongst members.

Wenger suggested that communities of practice are everywhere, and that we belong to several communities at any given time, in some cases as full members, in others as peripheral participants: families, schools, organisations, professions and so on. These environments are an integral part of our daily lives and they are so informal and pervasive that we are rarely fully aware of them, although they are, for the same reasons, extremely familiar. Similarly, the process of learning in a community of practice is something we are engaged in all the time, as we carry out our normal activities, and it is related to people’s ability to become more active participants, to the community’s ability to refine its practices

in order to make them more effective, and to the willingness of organisations and institutions to sustain and interconnect different communities. In this process, identity becomes the locus where the tension between individual and social environment is lived and articulated “in practice”.

1.3.1 Communities of practice: empirical research

Lave and Wenger drew on various sources to support their theoretical conceptualisations. These are as follows:

i. War Stories

An important inspiration for the idea of community of practice comes from the ethnographic studies undertaken by Orr (1986). These studies illustrated the tacit relationships between members of technical organisations, which implicitly regulated performance and could only be unearthed through a focus on the situated dimension of meaning-making. More specifically, Orr analysed how photocopier technicians used anecdotal experiences (“war stories”) in a cooperative diagnostic effort to understand broken photocopiers. He suggested that the fondness for war stories (dramatic accounts of encounters with unusual technical issues, which usually ended with a “victory” over the machine) were a distinctive aspect of the technician culture he described.

“Wherever technicians gather, much of the conversation consists of anecdotes of their experiences with machines and customers. During the working day, technicians will meet at particular restaurants and coffee shops at breakfast, lunch, or for coffee when things are slow; the conversation always includes the latest stories of unusual machine behaviour.” (Orr, 1990, p. 63).

In Orr’s case study the stories of unusual machine behaviour worked towards developing a sense of community and a collective memory; a narrative repository to be accessed whenever it was needed for diagnostic purposes.

Brown and Duguid (1998) expanded Orr’s interpretations linking them directly to the notions theorized in the CoP framework. They suggested that the war stories in Orr’s technician community determined trajectories of membership and were used to regulate the transition from newcomer to old-timer. As a newcomer’s stories became accepted and developed into those of an established member he/she became a legitimate member of the community.

ii. Apprenticeships

Other classic examples of CoP research are Lave and Wenger's studies (1991) of several apprenticeships (Yucatec midwives, Vai and Gola tailors, US Navy quartermasters, meat-cutters, non-drinking alcoholics in Alcoholics Anonymous), where people were involved in complex processes that would define their role, and their membership, in relevant social networks. These studies illustrated how people initially joined communities from the periphery and, as they became more competent, moved closer to the centre through legitimate peripheral participation. During this transition they would learn not only specific tasks and activities but, primarily, they would learn to "be someone". However, it is important to highlight that legitimate peripheral participation cannot, in Lave and Wenger's own words

"Be construed as a general claim that apprenticeship facilitates learning-in-practice in some inevitable way. Not all concrete realizations of apprenticeship learning are equally effective." (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 76).

The most undermining factor is represented, according to Lave and Wenger, by the process of commoditisation that has been affecting many trades and professions for decades. This process has turned many apprenticeships into a source of cheap, unskilled and disposable labour, denying newcomers access to more mature and meaningful practices. To illustrate this point, Lave and Wenger described the case of butchers' formal apprenticeships organised by trade schools in the US. These apprenticeships were initially based on didactic sessions in which meat cutters learned outdated skills that were useless in modern, automated supermarkets, but would be more suited in traditional shops. As a result, when they finally accessed supermarkets for the "on the job" phase of the programme, the apprentices found themselves already marginalised and frustrated, and they were usually given menial tasks (like wrapping the meat) until they left, in order to be replaced by other unskilled novices.

iii Claims Processors

A third example of research supporting communities of practice is represented by Wenger's ethnographic account of a typical working day in a unit of health insurance claims processors (1998). Wenger's study was based on a fairly detailed description of the procedures, the relationships and the tacit understandings shared by the members of a processing unit in a large American insurance company. The account provided a view from the standpoint of "Ariel", a composite character representative of claims processors.

Wenger described how Ariel used many “practical” tricks she learned through informal interaction with more experienced members in order to facilitate daily routines and speed up problem-solving. For Wenger, the way Ariel carried out her tasks showed the gap between the formal training she received, ultimately of very little use, and the practical knowledge she developed “on the job”, interacting with her peers and developing a practical knowledge of procedures and technical tools.

In his study, Wenger depicted a group of people engaged not only in learning a number of working practices, but also in making sense of their identities in relation to the corporation that employed them, and in relation to other external social contexts. He described the atmosphere in the community of practice as a mix of conviviality, boredom, professionalism and “getting on with things”, emphasising the “real life” quality of the phenomena, that is, the fact that members of the claims processor community were not simply carrying out activities, but were sharing significant aspects of their existences.

In the next paragraph I will describe one empirical case in further detail: the “classic” Alcoholics Anonymous study (Lave & Wenger, 1991). This case remains one of the more fascinating instances of how a community of practice functions. The description of the study will help highlight the critical aspects that informed the empirical part of this thesis. After having introduced these aspects, they will be discussed in the final section of the chapter.

1.3.2 Becoming a member in a community of practice: the Alcoholics

Anonymous case

The process of becoming a non-drinking alcoholic through Alcoholics Anonymous (Lave & Wenger, 1991) represents a good example of enculturation in a community of practice. An “A.A. apprentice” usually begins his or her trajectory of membership attending meetings several days a week, interacting with other members whose practices and identities “constitute” the A.A. community. These meetings are based on personal accounts of drinking problems and, initially, rely on old-timers telling their histories of dependence and how they eventually managed to become sober. The process of moving from a peripheral to a central participation is organised in a semi-formal way through “twelve steps” that gradually lead to sobriety, and the levels of engagement vary accordingly: a newcomer’s expected contribution may be as little as picking up a white chip at the end of a meeting, in order to signal the intention to refrain from drinking during the next 24 hours. At the end of the twelve-step cycle, a member is recognised as an old-timer and expected to visit an active drinker to try and persuade that person to become a new member. The ultimate

goal of this process is clearly the reconstruction of a new identity; the initial meetings are meant to provide newcomers with a frame of reference to reconstruct their life stories of addiction, incorporating them into new individual narratives which are partially predefined by the twelve steps.

1.3.3 The role of language in the A.A. community

According to Lave and Wenger the importance of language in a community of practice should never be overlooked. In the A.A. case, for example, the telling of life stories is described as “the most important vehicle for the display of membership.” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p.104). During A.A. meetings members tell stories of their struggle against alcohol based on the template provided by the 12 steps. In these meetings, they learn how to “talk about” the practices that, in their everyday life, helped them overcome their addiction.

Now, learning to talk about practices is, according to Lave and Wenger, a form of practice in itself which needs to be mastered in order to “display” full membership in the A.A. community. However, learning to talk about a practice does not automatically imply that newcomers learn the actual practice the language is about; in fact it seems possible for someone to tell made up life stories in order to gain A.A. membership and status, without carrying out any of the actions prescribed by the twelve steps (like refraining from drinking for 24 hours, and so on). Something similar happens fairly often in many professional communities, such as doctors. One curious example: in 2006 many newspapers reported the case of one Philip Winikoff, a 76-year-old Floridian who used to go door-to-door claiming he was a doctor, talking like a doctor and carrying a little black bag, offering women free “breast exams” (Washington Post - www.washingtonpost.com). The man was eventually arrested.

Furthermore, Lave and Wenger note that this “talking about” a practice is something distinct from “talking within” a practice, which seems to be mainly based on the exchange of information necessary to the progress of ongoing activities like, for example, when two A.A. members exchange hints as to how they could refrain from drinking during a formal wedding toast. This view of language as talking about and talking within practices implies a more problematic separation between activities and language and leads, I believe, to unnecessary confusion.

On the one hand, there is “talking about”, like for example telling “proper” A.A. life stories, which becomes a practice in itself that needs to be mastered through legitimate peripheral participation. On the other hand, there is “talking within” which is the pure and simple information exchange that supports the progress of activities. Then, on yet another level,

we have the actual practices that genuinely define the competences in a CoP, like those exemplified by the twelve steps in the A.A. case. This suggests that in Lave and Wenger's model activities and language are seen as separate conceptual entities; language can become a practice, but when this happens it assumes merely a performative function: something that is "done" in order to display membership. When language is not a performance, then it is just an unproblematic "information exchange".

In relationship to language, this thesis is more oriented towards a post-structuralist and social constructivist approach (Fairclough, 1992; Foucault, 1977), according to which symbolic interactions (language but also written texts, non-verbal exchanges and so on) are not only performance or information exchange but also *active construction* and, therefore, they may not be separated from activities (and the related identities) on a conceptual level. From this perspective, talking about and talking within as in the A.A. example are part of the same discursive process that includes also culturally informed beliefs and texts ("discourses") about alcoholism, for example a doctor's diagnosis that contributes to construct alcoholism as a pathologic addiction. This discursive process defines the very nature of the A.A. activities (seen as a path to "recovery") and the related identities.

Discourse and practice are, in other words, inextricably bound to each other in what Chouliaraki and Fairclough (1999) describe as a dialectic relationship. In this relationship social actors produce representations of practices, which are then incorporated in their own practices through a process of recontextualisation and active re-construction. Therefore, it could be argued that the way people talk about *and* within the A.A. twelve steps recontextualise and to a certain extent redefine the everyday practices associated with those steps. This last point will be further discussed in the following, conclusive section, as it is absolutely crucial to the argument of this chapter and to the overall research project which underlies the thesis.

1.4 A critical perspective on Communities of Practice

The CoP notion has attracted criticism in relationship to two areas: its general theoretical implications and their usefulness for educational strategies, and the relationship between practices, discourse and identity. This second criticism is more relevant in the context of this thesis and will be discussed in more detail.

1.4.1 CoP's implications for educational practices

On a general level, Schwen and Hara (2004) critically highlighted the CoP's shift from a descriptive posture to a prescriptive one, arguing that the two are not interchangeable and in fact quite at odds with each other. The first CoP theorisation adapted elements from Marxist critical theory to describe the dynamics of membership and identity in communities of practitioners, focusing on the informal and non-hierarchical dimension. The notion became wildly popular in several fields like education, the study of virtual communities (see following chapter) and management training in particular, in which CoPs have evolved into a tool for implementing organisational change and increasing productivity, and where the original critical edge is lost in the oversimplifications typical of management's discourse.

Other authors (Ahonen, Engeström, & Virkkunen, 2000), stressed the fact that Lave and Wenger's depiction of unrealistically stable cultures does not help us understand how modern societies engage in deliberate activities of knowledge advancement. These authors pointed out that, in reality, there are no clear-cut roles between old-timers and new-timers in a CoP, that membership is rarely based on a linear progression from a peripheral to a central participation, and that communities do not have clearly defined boundaries but they continuously interconnect and overlap with each other (see also Lemke, 1997).

1.4.2 Practice, discourse and identity in a CoP

According to Wenger, CoPs are not only about knowing, they are "about being together, living meaningfully, and altogether being human." (Wenger, 1998, p. 134). Members of a community of practice actively negotiate meanings in order to find a "raison d'être" and define a position in relationship to other communities and to society in general. This negotiation of meanings is carried out through two diverse but complementary processes: participation and reification. Participation is the active process of engagement in a social community; this kind of engagement influences all relationships within the community and actively shapes identities. According to Wenger, participation "places the negotiation of meanings in the context of our forms of membership in various communities. It is a constituent of our identities." (Wenger, 1998, p. 57). The term reification (from the Latin *res-fire*: to make a thing), on the other hand, is described as the human ability to create "objects", not in a physical sense, or at least not exclusively, but in a conceptual and symbolic one; it is the way through which a community conceptualises its own practice, "reifying it" in an abstract and congealed form.

“With the term reification I mean to cover a wide range of processes that include making, designing, representing, naming, encoding, and describing, as well as perceiving, interpreting, using, reusing, decoding and recasting.” (Wenger, 1998, p. 59).

Wenger’s ideas presuppose an implicit separation between non-verbal knowledge, expressed through participation in a community of practice, and verbal, discursive knowledge expressed through reification, i.e., symbolisation and representation; the two are parts of a dual configuration and they mutually influence each other. It is not a dichotomy, Wenger carefully specifies, but it inevitably ends up looking like one, because the conceptual separation between “participation” and “reification” leads to the separation between activity, and the language supposed to “represent” it and symbolise it. The same type of dualism was noted in the A.A. case study described in the previous section, that is, the idea that language and practice are conceptually separated. This thesis favours instead the non-dualist view according to which symbolic interactions and situated activities should be understood as intertwined aspects: two moments of the same discursive process. A sport like football could provide us with an additional example to clarify this crucial aspect.

From a dualistic point of view, football is based on a number of practices as well as on a separate set of symbolic interactions going alongside them. In this sense, football involves engaging in certain activities on the one hand, while thinking and talking about those activities in particular ways on the other. Someone could learn how to “reify” football in certain way, “talking about” it in order to display membership within a particular community, like the supporters of a specific team. The same person might actually play football every now and then, and in those occasions he would be exchanging information with other players in order to define roles on the pitch, call certain passes during play and so on.

From a different, non-dualist, point of view the texts, the values, the moral statements that characterise a socio-cultural setting (the “discourses”) influence football practices in many ways. In the US, for example, football (“soccer”) is discursively constructed in the popular culture, in the media and in every day talk as a “soft” and not particularly masculine sport. As a result, soccer is practiced mostly as a recreational sport for children and young women. Therefore, it could be argued that the way people “talk about” football in the US influences the practice of football: how it is played and who plays it.

Tusting (2005), speaking from a perspective firmly grounded in critical discourse analysis, suggested that “any theory which places participation and reification at its heart needs to conceptualise how language is part of these processes” (Tusting, 2005, p. 7). She argued that research on CoPs needs a theoretical model of language, one which would enable to analyse language as a constituting dimension of social practice.

“Despite the centrality of negotiation of meaning to the communities of practice model, and The key role of language within processes of participation and reification, Wenger does not draw out ideas about the relationship between language and meaning making more generally, beyond stating that meaning making cannot be reduced to language alone. However, while Wenger is careful to make clear that is not just talking about language when talking about meaning, language is clearly central to much of the experience of negotiation of meaning we encounter in communities of practice” (Tusting, 2005, p. 40).

These considerations about the relationship between discourse and practice are closely related to how identity is viewed in a CoP. Wenger explicitly states that:

“The experience of identity in practice is a way of being in the world. It is not equivalent to a self image; it is not, in its essence, discursive or reflective.” (Wenger, 1998, p.151).

However, Wenger does not clarify what this “way of being in the world” actually is, and what is its relationship with the discursive and reflective dimensions beyond the concept of “reification”. It is, in fact, very hard to imagine a “way of being in the world” that is not mediated, negotiated and to a certain degree constructed through discourse and symbolic interactions. Furthermore, social and psychological research on identity has long overcome traditional views which see subjectivity as simple self-concept, self-image, or knowledge of the self. Most contemporary studies in this area concentrate instead on how identities are *actively* constructed (Gee, 2000; Gergen, 1993; Edley & Wetherell, 1997) or “authored” (Holland et al., 1998), in social contexts like illness, academia, professions and so on, which are *at the same time* socio-cultural fields of practice and discourse.

The critical points highlighted in this paragraph had an important role in shaping the empirical project described in the later chapters of the thesis. The main implication is that a focus on the *discursive practices* actively employed by people is the best way to

understand the process of identity construction in a community of practice. These themes will be objects of a more detailed discussion in the methodological chapter (Ch. 3).

Summary

In this chapter I have described the socio-cultural approach to learning and the notion of community of practice, highlighting the unexplored link between discourse, practice and identity which informed the main objective of the thesis and the research question: is the construction of a common identity taking place in a specific online collaborative environment?

The chapter's main argument was that socio-cultural practices, language and identity are conceptually linked to each other, but this link becomes blurred and problematic in the CoP model due to the dichotomy between participation and "reification", which regulates the process of negotiation of meanings according to Wenger's theory.

The concept of community of practice assumes that mutual engagement in a number of shared practices supports learning and the construction of a common identity, while language is seen as either a form of performative practice carried out to "display" membership, or as an unproblematic information exchange. This thesis, on the other hand, favours the view according to which language, practices and identities need to be seen as parts of the same discursive, and constructive, process.

In the next chapter I will provide a specific insight into the notion of identity, in particular in relation to disciplinary identity, illustrating how subjectivity is often articulated at the semiotic intersection between different contexts of discourse and practice, some of which may be online.

2. Disciplinary membership as a form of socio-cultural learning, and its relationship to online identity formation

The previous chapter highlighted the complex relationship between activity and identity, which was interpreted through the theoretical lens provided by the socio-cultural approach. In particular, the chapter drew on the social psychology of G.H. Mead (1974), Vygotsky's (1978) seminal notion of culturally mediated action and the structuralist and post-structuralist perspectives in sociology, in order to define the theoretical foundations of the "ontogenetic" view of activity held in this thesis. According to this view the practices shared in professional and disciplinary fields have a crucial role in the "making" of socially constructed identities.

The chapter argued that these theoretical threads tend to converge in the idea of community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998), in which identity is seen as a trajectory from peripheral to central participation in a specific and situated cultural field. In this trajectory, the transition from novice to expert represents an important process of identity development.

The chapter also noted that, in order to study such process, we first need to clarify the role of language in communities of practice, and suggested that the discursive and symbolic dimensions offer us useful theoretical and methodological tools to analyse the social identities that arise from our engagement in culturally situated practices.

This suggestion will be at the centre of the methodological chapter, in which discourse analysis will be proposed as a theory and a method to address the issues at the heart of this thesis. In this chapter, I will attempt to clarify further the theoretical scenario, putting particular emphasis on the novice-to-expert transition, which so clearly emerged as an arena of identity development in the previous chapter. This will be followed by a literature review of studies that have explored identity construction in online settings. The notion of identity will be constantly linked to learning and development, highlighting the relationship between identity construction and learning which constitutes the main theoretical assumption of this thesis.

2.1 Disciplinary membership and identity

The notion of expertise has been studied from different theoretical perspectives. For example, in cognitive psychology expertise is essentially an emerging feature of the human cognitive architecture, dependent, in particular, on the inner workings of memory. The work of De Groot (1965) and Chase and Simon (1973) has showed how skilled chess players are significantly better than novice ones at reproducing briefly seen configurations taken from real games, but they do not show significant differences when attempting to reproduce randomised configurations. This suggests that expertise in problem-solving draws on extensive experience stored in the long term memory, which can be quickly selected and applied to identify the best procedures for solving a problem. Therefore, we become “cognitively skilful” in a field when the information in our long term memory, stored through practice and training, permits us to quickly recognise the characteristics of a situation, giving us indications as to what to do and when to do it.

Related studies (Ericsson & Charness, 1994; Walker, 1987) have also demonstrated that expertise is domain-dependent, as large amounts of information stored in long term memory mean that experts have more domain knowledge at their disposal when performing a task. Drawing on their domain-specific “capital” of information experts can circumvent the general limits of their cognitive architecture by being able to select and process more relevant information, while simultaneously reducing the amount of effort spent on processing less relevant information.

Alongside the cognitive dimension, obviously important but not the main focus of this thesis, the novice-to-expert transition can also be conceptualised as enculturation and increased participation in a community of practice. As suggested in the previous chapter, increased participation can be observed when newcomers get involved in a number of situated socio-cultural practices, gradually developing expertise and identities as “legitimate members” (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Other socio-cultural viewpoints have also dealt with this notion. For example, research in traditional school settings (Holland & Lave, 2001) suggests that learners’ identities have an important role in the pedagogical process and the development of a sense of confidence and expertise in learners. In particular, Holland and Lave (2001) argue that the person and the society are in continuous motion and tend to co-develop. Individuals can be located along ontogenetic trajectories, constantly renegotiating and “thickening” their identities as learners by balancing the tension between larger socio-historical patterns and the drive to be identified and recognised in a distinctive way.

In a recent study which also investigates the role of identity development in the pedagogical process, Wortham (2006) shows how the cognitive models informed by the official curriculum became associated with particular individuals in the classroom, highlighting how such models are always intertwined with the social identities (in Wortham's specific case, with racial and gender identities) and the interactions of those who practice and construct knowledge. In his study, Wortham (2006) shows how particular students developed specific gender and racial identities because the discussions and the classroom activities associated with certain curricular themes provided categories used by teachers to identify them, and by students to identify themselves. These themes facilitated identity development because they implicitly tended to describe certain types of people and the social, gender and racial roles that such people were supposed to adopt in the classroom context.

In the field of linguistics and rhetoric, the "genre approach" (Bittencourt-Santos, 1996; Swales, 1990) has been used to address a number of similar pedagogical and socio-cultural issues, including the access to, and the socialisation in, cultural fields through which specific disciplinary and professional identities are formed. In academia, for example, genre authors (Swales & Lindemann, 2002; Yakhontova, 1998) have described the transition from novice to expert as a gradual learning process, through which students master the various academic "genres and registers" they are expected to produce during their transition, such as the scientific research article, the abstract, the literature review and so on. While some have looked specifically at the genres' linguistic and rhetorical structure (Bunton, 1999; Paltridge, 2002), others (Swales, 2004) have specifically argued that knowing how to reproduce genre norms is very much related to learning, but less in terms of literacy than in terms of identity formation, suggesting that students gradually become expert members by learning the beliefs and practices of their disciplines. Similarly, experienced practitioners use their disciplinary knowledge to "construct a credible representation of themselves and their work, aligning themselves with the socially shaped identities of their communities" (Hyland, 2002, p.1091). Taking on a disciplinary voice, experienced members also allow other practitioners to reconstruct a disciplinary identity by assessing, implicitly or explicitly, their level of expertise, that is, by providing a benchmark to evaluate the novices' claims as legitimate members of the disciplinary community.

Finally, an account of how the cognitive and the sociocultural dimensions are both involved in the process of disciplinary identity formation is provided by Yarden and Esterman (2008). Their work is on the backdrop of the increasing necessity to provide support for interdisciplinary research in different areas of science, and the associated need to overcome barriers in languages, approaches and epistemologies between

scientists from different backgrounds. Yarden and Esterman (Ibid) suggest that the development of disciplinary identity influences the way knowledge is acquired and communicated. In their study, they carried out a thematic analysis of interviews and transcriptions of meetings involving physicists and biologists who were attempting to work on a common project, and found that differences in language and epistemology led to different ways of prioritising and categorising information during daily interactions. These differences drew upon different disciplinary identities and made communications between the two groups of researchers rather difficult: physicists were more “systemic” and keener on abstractions supported by complex mathematical formulas; biologists on the other hand tended to prefer detailed, richer explanations and taxonomies. This led to mutual accusations; the biologists were criticising physicists for being superficial and more interested in abstract and simplistic mathematical models, while physicists were criticising biologists for being incapable of making useful generalisations.

2.2 The notion of habitus as a framework for disciplinary identity

These studies contribute to reinforce the view held in this thesis that learning is much more than just acquiring or constructing knowledge but is closely related to the development of an identity. For example, Swales (2004) suggests that in addition to knowledge about genres, novices in a disciplinary field must gain “a more nuanced and exact set of understandings of their genre sets” (Swales, 2004 p.21). This “nuanced and more exact understanding” goes to the very heart of the transition from novice to expert. It is closely related to the process of “participation” conceptualised in the CoP (community of practice) model (see previous chapter), that is, the gradual engagement in a number of shared practices which leads to a spontaneous, natural identification with a disciplinary or professional community.

This idea of spontaneous identification, both in genre studies and in the CoP model, appears to be inspired by Bourdieu’s notion of “habitus” (Bourdieu, 1984). Bourdieu was the first to argue that our social identities arise because the social structures that characterise a cultural field have been unconsciously embodied, incorporating the patterns, norms and regularities that tend to occur within it. Cultural fields emerge when society and history are objectified in systems of meaning; examples of cultural fields include sports, professional communities (lawyers, doctors or, like in this thesis, psychologists) or any other context where values, rules and power relations affect how people think, behave and communicate. We negotiate our position within a cultural field according to the amount of cultural capital we can claim, both for ourselves and for the field in relation to other fields. The cultural capital of a field is the result of the conventional

value attributed to the objects that constitute it, and it influences all relations and exchanges within the field. For example, an academic degree constitutes cultural capital in the educational field. These patterns, norms and regularities include behavioural codes, habits, ways of talking and thinking. According to Bourdieu (1984), as people are exposed to the patterns and the norms of a particular cultural field they wish to be part of, they gradually assimilate them and re-elaborate them until they become anchored to their bodies. They become parts of a “habitus”.

In Bourdieu’s own words, a habitus is a “structuring structure” (Bourdieu, 1977, p.24), or a set of organising principles produced by historical and social conditions, which regulates the spontaneous, almost natural enactment of practices. Such a set of organising principles works like a “generator” of countless possible thoughts and actions. In other words, the habitus is not the mechanistic and passive reproduction of a cultural field in one’s behaviour, but is rather the result of an improvised and, sometimes, unpredictable negotiation, and therefore, it can do justice to the richness and complexity of human agency and identity.

In fact, Bourdieu’s most influencing contribution to our understanding of identity lies in his attempt to overcome the division between “objectivism and subjectivism”, that is, between the role of objective social, economical and historical structures in determining our experience on the one hand, and the active, constructive role of subjects as independent agents on the other. He suggested that humans, although having history inscribed onto their very bodies, retain the ability to surprise the “objective observer” with acts of improvised, unpredictable individuality. A good example is the “artistic habitus” which, although clearly drawing on cultural and historical models, can be expressed through specific, sometimes unpredictable and very distinctive practices, dispositions, expectations, languages, dress styles and so on.

The gradual and largely unconscious emergence of a habitus allows for the development of an increasing sense of belonging to, and identification with, particular communities of practice. The notion of habitus, in other words, provides us with a socially structured account of the formation of disciplinary identity: an aggregation of socio-historical regularities, power relations and norms that practitioners learn to master as a result of specialising in their disciplines, gradually moving from being a novice to being an expert.

In one of his most popular books (*Homo Academicus*, 1988), Bourdieu tried, as he noted later on in his career (Bourdieu, 2003), to unveil those “objective structures of a social microcosm to which the researcher himself belongs” (Bourdieu, 2003, p. 283), suggesting that all social dynamics in the academic field are mediated by specific, sometimes conflicting, types of habitus. According to Bourdieu, the possible variations of the

academic habitus, especially in French academia as this was the context he was most familiar with from an ethnographic perspective, reflect the imbalances in the distribution of economic and cultural capital within universities, which in turn translate into imbalances over opportunities and material resources. These imbalances lead to tensions between “dominant” disciplines like law and medicine, and “dominated” disciplines like humanities. The tensions are in turn reproduced, appropriated and personalised in the transition from novice to expert, leading eventually to the formation of specific types of habitus, and specific disciplinary identities.

A more recent study (Dressen-Hammouda, 2008) analysed the texts produced by one geology doctoral student during the course of his studies, highlighting how the process of developing mastery was not only apparent in the gradual development of specialist knowledge, but also in the increasing capacity to use the appropriate discursive forms, i.e. knowing how to say the right thing, in the right way, at the right time. The study suggests that by doing this, the student was drawing on the discipline’s symbolic genre, gradually constructing a credible representation both of himself and of his field of expertise. During this process, the student moved, as a disciplinary novice, from a simple use of the superficial features of the text, to a more sophisticated handling of field evidence, which allowed his work to be published in the discipline’s research journals, as a legitimate member of the geologists’ community of practice.

According to the genre’s approach, and in line with Bourdieu’s ideas, the formation of a disciplinary identity can be defined as a transformational process through which people construct meaning and negotiate power by interacting with others, gradually mastering the modes of production of “genres” and, at the same time, assimilating and re-elaborating the norms and the beliefs of their communities until these become part of their bodies, that is, until they become a natural and spontaneous way of thinking, talking, moving, dressing and so forth.

This process can only be observed through an ethnographic and interpretive approach, capable of engaging with the semiotic dimension of meaning-making that manifests itself in texts, discourses, and conversations. As we will see in the next chapter, this is precisely the approach afforded by James Paul Gee’s discourse analysis (1999). According to this approach, learning is about becoming a certain kind of person in a variety of cultural contexts, by making visible and recognisable a particular way of being in the world.

An interpretive approach allows the exploration of what it means for an individual to be socialised into a community of practice, highlighting the contextual and shifting nature of professional identities and the related representations of expertise. For example, Rogers (2007) analysed the narratives produced by novice teachers from ethnic minorities

suggesting, in line with other studies described in this chapter, that the process of induction into teaching is similar to the process of learning to talk. From this perspective, the transition from novice to expert is essentially the ability to articulate different voices, and therefore different professional identities, depending on contextual factors in the education field. In her research, Rogers (2007) described the struggle of novice teachers when trying to articulate competing voices to represent their expertise, depending on where they were positioned in relation to the students' perspectives, the school perspective and the institutional perspective outlined in policy documents.

2.3 Identity construction in online settings.

The notion of identity, seen both as personal and membership identity, has received much attention in studies on online interactions (see Baym, 2006 for a literature review). Early research on the formation and the negotiation of online identities (Myers, 1987; Reid, 1994) noted that two of the main characteristics of computer-mediated communication were its potential for anonymous interactions and the associated reduction in visual cues. These features provided the perfect conditions for identity play and exploration. The idea of identity play was mainly based on the postmodern view that sees subjectivity as a fluid and shifting process of semiotic construction. During the 1990s, the plasticity of computer-mediated communication seemed to make such process even more fluid, as it allowed the most radical forms of "transformation", such as gender swapping, or the creation of entire alternate lives in fantastic, virtual worlds.

In her influential work, Turkle (1995) suggested that the process of "disembodiment" facilitated by CMC, and the associated detachment from time and space, opens up scenarios in which the idea of "multiple selves", advocated as a defining feature of contemporary life (Gergen, 1993), reaches its fullest realisation. In the early years of the WWW, there seemed to be no limit to the number of different identities that could be enacted online; becoming a gender-swapping elf in collaborative online fantasy games (Multi-User Dungeons, or MUDs) was a perfectly "possible" and valid option. Such possibility, according to Turkle (1995), allowed many to deal with very real psychological issues, as the active exploration permitted online seemed to provide an unexpected therapeutic route to the resolution of psychological conflicts off-line.

In fact, Turkle suggests that online environments allow people to "move into" (Turkle, 1995, p.189) personal issues. She tells the story of "Gordon", a young depressed graduate student who took advantage of the anonymity afforded by CMC to start afresh, establishing relationships based on a number of ideal personas, rather than his actual

one. By experimenting with different “avatars” in a MUD, each describing different qualities of his self he was trying to develop, Gordon found online interactions very comforting and therapeutic.

Similarly, Myers (1987) argued that online identity play can lead to a greater sense of power and control over oneself and that the playful construction of an alternative self enabled by the Internet could facilitate real, positive psychological changes and improve social relationships (see also McKenna & Bargh, 1998). More recent research has confirmed this essentially positive function of online interactions, suggesting that the internet allows some internet users to express normally withheld aspects of themselves, as they are unaffected by the inhibitions typical of face-to-face interactions. For example, Adams et al (2005) and Gavin et al. (2008) found that these characteristics make online contexts a unique space for self-expression in particularly sensitive areas like self-harming and anorexia.

However, others have contested the positive view of the internet as “postmodern psychotherapy”. Donath (1999), for example, used evidence from actual online interactions to suggest that people do not tend to playfully re-define their gender, willingly exploring existential possibilities and addressing their otherwise unassailable issues. Instead they seem to reproduce and exaggerate traditional, potentially dangerous, gender stereotypes. For example, she found that men who pretended to be women tended to represent themselves as impossibly sexy and attractive, while something similar was noted amongst young women who tended to misrepresent their appearance online. These findings suggest a more negative function of identity play in online settings: to compensate for unsatisfying and problematic real-life experiences.

Another alternative theoretical explanation of identity formation online has been proposed by Lea and Spears (1995), who adapted self-categorisation theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) to study computer-mediated interactions.

Self-categorisation theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) is supported by classic studies based the ‘minimal group paradigm’: anonymous participants were randomly categorised as members of a minimally meaningful group, e.g. x or y. Despite the experimenters’ efforts to show that group membership was arbitrary, members started to treat the groups as different in a meaningful way. For example by allocating members of their own group (the in-group) greater rewards than the members of alternative groups (the out-groups). According to this theory, we categorise ourselves either in terms of social identity or personal identity. If we were in a one to one conversation with a friend, or expressing strong disagreement with other group members, our personal identity would be more likely to be salient. However, when we categorise ourselves in terms of our social identity we

take on the characteristics of that particular social group. The theory also asserts that the in-group will seek to distinguish itself from the out-group by attributing negative distinctions to the out-group or bolstering the positive aspects of the in-group.

Lea and Spears (1995) drew upon social categorisation theory to define their SIDE (Social Individuation and Deindividuation) model. This model conceptualises the self as a range of self-categories including both personal and social identities, and identifies the situational elements that will make some self-categories more appropriate in a certain context, and therefore more likely to be enacted. From the SIDE perspective, some online situations will exacerbate the disconnection from off-line and embodied aspects of the self, encouraging identity play and deception; while other situations will encourage a “re-connection” with those same aspects, and will lead to the enactment of identities which are consistent with embodied versions of the self. For example, Lea and Spears (1995) analysed behaviour in an online forum for university students, and found that when the forum was a faculty one the types of identities enacted online were mainly anonymous and depersonalised, as the specific contextual nature of the forum was reproducing traditional in-group/out-group distinctions (the students and the university), and the students did not want to get caught expressing behaviours which were not normative and therefore punishable. In more “unofficial” forums, on the other hand, the level of anonymity was much less pronounced.

A similar explanation of identity variation online has been suggested by Baym (2006), who argued that identities constructed in online groups are dependent on the norms and conventions of the groups in which they are formed. Therefore, while identity play and related dynamics may be appropriate in a certain online context, they may be completely unacceptable in another.

The contradicting views described above show that there are still many things we do not know about the way CMC impacts on identity, and what consequences this impact has on relationships and participation in social life, not to mention learning. Things are made even more complicated by the constantly changing internet landscape, with text-based MUDs all but extinct and replaced by visual MMOs (short for MMORPGs – Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games), and with social networking becoming a global phenomenon.

In fact, more recent studies (e.g., Kennedy, 2006; McPherson, 2000) argue whether the traditional focus on anonymity that characterised classic studies on online identities remains useful. Kennedy (2006), for example, suggests that internet identity research should move away from the generalised claim that online identities are anonymous, multiple and fragmented, and begin to appreciate that very often online identities are continuous with offline selves. For this reason, she suggests to go beyond internet

identities, and to look more closely at offline contexts of online selves. To support her position, Kennedy (2006) draws on empirical research into internet use by a group of minority ethnic women in the UK (Project Her@) which took place in the late 1990s. The project involved fourteen mature ethnic working class women from disadvantaged backgrounds. During the project, it was found that the women showed no sign of wanting to hide their gender and ethnicity and so “benefit” from the anonymity allowed by CMC. In fact, they were keen to make explicit and implicit references to their gender and ethnic backgrounds. Such findings have particular relevance in the context of this thesis, where the relationship between offline and online aspects of identities will emerge as a key dimension of the empirical work carried out in an online forum (see chapters 5 and 6).

The complex and problematic relationship between online and offline worlds appears to be at the centre of even more recent research on online identities. Boyd (2009), for example, analysed the phenomenon of large numbers of users “migrating” from Myspace (www.myspace.com), one of the most popular social networking sites, to Facebook (www.facebook.com), another incredibly popular online social network which experienced a great expansion in 2008 at the expense of the former. She argues that such migration presents the typical characteristics of a “white flight”, that is, white middle class people moving to an environment which is more in tune with their perceived class status and, obviously, their identities. On the other hand, people from ethnic and working class backgrounds are “left behind” in MySpace which is gradually becoming a sort of “virtual ghetto”. Boyd (2009) carried out a number of interviews with young users of both social networks, and found that patterns of online interactions and relationships appear to be regulated by the traditional categories which we use to construct ourselves in society: it is about choosing contexts that support and enhance self and mutual recognition on the basis of class distinctions and social aspirations. In this regard, CMC might be contributing to reinforce social inequalities by “reifying” them in online spaces where even the technical features (the clean, more structured interface of Facebook as opposed to Myspace’s more chaotic, coloured and open one) seem to be reproducing class distinctions and ways to construct and express social identities.

2.4 Online Identity construction: implications for social interactions and learning

Perhaps unsurprisingly, studies on online identity construction have influenced educational research based on constructivism and critical theory. This research used notions such as identity play and free exploration of multiple selves to study issues of power, racism and gender relations in online learning environments (Kolko et al., 2000;

Lenert & Harris, 1994). These studies have argued that the technological nature of computer mediated communication, with its lack of social presence and social-contextual cues such as race, gender and status could encourage less inhibited and more democratic interactions amongst learners. However, other studies (De Montes et al., 2002) suggested that social inequalities, rather than being on “off” mode in online settings, are in fact reproduced and still reflect different views of power, ethnicity and identity between majority and minority learners.

For example, a study carried out in a Japanese mailing list of English as second language students (Matsuda, 2002), showed how the embedded hierarchy that characterises Japanese society, which is expressed through verb endings, address terms and honorifics, did not disappear online. Those linguistic features were simply used differently, shifting from conventional criteria for establishing social relations based on age, gender and social status, to other criteria available online, mostly the amount of information students could demonstrate through discourse. Therefore, despite the relatively egalitarian characteristics of online discourse, participation in the Japanese online community did not create an “ideal” space where social hierarchy was removed. In fact, hierarchy was transformed and expressed like before, with the only difference that the emphasis online was put on the difference between “teachers” (who knew a lot) and “learners” (who knew little). This difference led to different identities being enacted within the online space, and to shifting, but clearly identifiable power relations.

The relationship between identity and online (or ICT-based) learning has also been explored from the perspective of “identification” with the internet. For example, Holloway and Valentine (2003) observed a group of 14-year-old boys who shared a common identity as “experts” in ICT or ‘geeks’. This common identity provided them with a supportive social network and increased motivation to learn how to use ICT, in contrast to a group of girls who did not share the same type of identification and had negative attitudes towards ICT. In a similar study, Joiner et al. (2006) developed a number of questionnaires to measure internet experience and internet identification, and distributed them at the beginning and at the end of a university year. Their findings confirmed that a positive and stable identification with the Internet can be predictive of future internet use for educational purposes. They used the findings to suggest that the development of stronger internet identification can be increased through specific techniques, such as Wise schooling (Steele, 1992), that aim specifically at “reconstructing” learners’ identities. Wise schooling, for instance, emphasises the use of “challenge encouragement”, helping students overcome the negative idea that intellectual ability is fixed at birth and cannot change despite the amount of effort and practice put into learning.

2.5 Learning and disciplinary identity across online and offline contexts

Particularly interesting in the context of this thesis is the work carried out by Gray and Tatar (2004) whose approach to learning and development resonates with the theories and ideas outlined in the current and the previous chapter. Gray and Tatar (2004) looked at the professional trajectory of a participant in “Tapped In”, a “Multi-User Virtual Environment” (MUVE) designed to promote teacher professional development, exploring how this single participant entered and became a legitimate member, and how his online activities related to other off-line aspects of his professional practice. Gray and Tatar (2004) drew on elements of socio-cultural theory to make sense of the dynamics they were observing, identifying the complex set of personal, social, institutional, cultural and technological issues that can influence efforts to facilitate online professional development for teachers. They suggest that such development involves changes in patterns of participation and identity in socio-cultural activities, as well as a reciprocal relationship between the individual and the social context in which “participants’ changing roles are mutually defined with those of other people and with dynamic cultural processes”. (Gray & Tatar, 2004, p.406).

More specifically, they analysed the life trajectory of “Robert”, an American teacher who moved to France to teach English, and noted that such trajectory was intertwined with his professional interactions in Tapped In. He used the online context to connect with distant colleagues, partly to address his sense of isolation, but also driven by his intellectual interest in serious educational issues. Gradually he became an expert, and a leader, within Tapped In help-desk, while at the same time becoming a confident teacher trainer in France. Gray and Tatar (2004) argue that both roles were extensions of Robert’s professional identity, and therefore not simply expressions of private psychological change, but new ways of constructing himself in interpersonal interactions, both online and off-line.

Also relevant to this thesis is the work carried out by Shumar and Renninger (2002) in an online forum of maths teachers and students (the Math Forum). Their work emphasises aspects such as community membership and identity construction, highlighting some crucial aspects of socio-cultural learning which have been explored also in this thesis. Renninger and Shumar (2004) suggested that the way teachers in the Math Forum “imagined” the online community had a significant effect on their sense of professional identity and efficacy. In their studies, the authors applied a methodology for the study of online communities that involves triangulation across several types of data, such as participant observation, in-depth interviews and log-file analysis. Similar methodologies,

drawing on a common framework based on discourse analysis and socio-cultural learning, have been used in this thesis (see Chapter 4 for an in depth description of the methodology).

Building on the work of Anderson (1991), Renninger and Shumar (2004) argued that online communities are based on symbolic boundaries that regulate attachment and belonging. According to them, understanding how such boundaries are defined and negotiated is what, from an analytical point of view, allows the researcher to understand the forms of connection experienced by social agents in a particular field, and their motivation to learn and participate as active and productive members. In line with studies about the plasticity and the flexibility of online identity formation described earlier in this chapter, Renninger and Shumar (2004) noted that the symbolic boundaries that underlie the emergence of an online community are the result of a complex process of symbolic construction, which involves making connections with many other sub-groups and communities, both virtual and real. In this respect, they argue that the Internet has made hybrid forms of community more possible than in the past. Such forms cannot probably be equated with the idea of “virtual”, as in “completely non-physical and disembodied”, but they allowed for a greater flexibility of forms of interaction and symbolic communication and that has expanded the notions of community giving it richer and more sophisticated connotations.

According to Renninger and Shumar (2004) these flexible and “possible” imagined communities are likely to be based on heterogeneous and overlapping sets of boundaries consistent with the model of the “rhizome” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). They argue that the notion of rhizome can provide us with a theoretical model that exemplifies a particular type of structure and pattern, based on diversity, separation of parts and non-linear organisation. Such a complex model can help us conceptualise virtual communities as based on several non-linear connections with many other overlapping subgroups, subcultures and with the wider cultural fields they belong to. From this perspective, the online forum of math teachers analysed by Renninger and Shumar (2004) is only one part of a complex semiotic configuration that includes other online groups, actual contexts of teaching practice and the wider professional community of maths teachers.

Another notion (similar to the rhizome) that can also help our understanding of networked and socio-cultural learning, is James Gee’s “affinity space” (2005). According to Gee, the idea of community carries connotations of close-knit personal ties among people which do not reflect the actual relationships that characterise online networks. In such contexts, even the idea of membership acquires different meanings across the different

communities of practice that constitute the network, and there are many possible ways of “being a member” in each of these communities.

Gee suggests to avoid treating individuals as members of a specific community, to focus instead on the “semiotic social spaces” or affinity spaces (Gee, 2005, p. 216), which are defined by the varying degrees of affinity and participation expressed by individuals in several interconnected contexts. In such spaces, people relate to each other primarily in terms of common interests, goals and practices, and their “membership” cannot be pinned down as it is distributed across the network.

As an example of affinity spaces, Gee (2005) describes the networks that emerge around popular multiplayer video games. These networks are characterised by several groups, websites, communities and forums, each with different features and each focusing on different aspects of the games - such as one of their many multiplayer variations - but all interconnected in a semiotic network based on a consistent system of practices and symbols. In this sense, participation and learning are intertwined with the capacity to articulate a consistent set of practices, values and languages across several interconnected contexts. Participation and learning are, in other words, based on the effort to define a consistent sense of identity, as a gamer or as a legitimate professional, depending on the circumstances and the varying levels of commitment and engagement that make certain aspects of the self more salient than others.

This dynamic view of identity allows mobility and legitimates participation in a cultural field like a disciplinary or professional field. In fact, it could be argued that the common element amid the overlapping boundaries and connections of a cultural field, the semiotic “glue” that holds the rhizome, or the affinity spaces, together, is represented precisely by the practices and the identities shared by those who participate within and across a network. On the one hand, this is the development of what Bourdieu (1977) called *habitus*, i.e. the set of durable, transferable dispositions explored earlier in this chapter when describing the process of sociocultural learning behind the novice-to-expert transition. On the other hand, it is the process of “legitimate peripheral participation” described by Lave and Wenger (1991), which has been extensively explored, and critiqued, in the previous chapter. The specific function of computer-mediated communication within the network of affinity spaces is that of encouraging connections and participation, leading to the production of specific discursive practices and to the construction of new types of subjects. These are precisely the phenomena which have been observed and analysed in this thesis.

Summary

In this chapter, I have further expanded the theoretical background of this thesis, by drawing on studies that explored the novice-to-expert transition and the construction of personal and disciplinary identities in online settings. I have explored contributions from Pierre Bourdieu (1977, 1984, 1988), and linked them to Lave and Wenger's ideas about community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991), identifying a consistent framework for the study of identity in an online forum from a perspective firmly focused on socio-cultural learning. I can attempt now to articulate working definitions for the two main notions explored in the thesis. There are other definitions but these are the ones that have informed every aspect of the empirical work, which will be described and discussed in the next chapters.

Identity

Drawing on studies on identity, both in real and virtual contexts (Gee, 2005; Gergen, 1993; Kennedy, 2006; McKenna & Bargh, 1998; McPherson, 2000; Turkle 1995), identity can be defined in this thesis as a dynamic process of symbolic construction, negotiation and renegotiation which draws on cultural, historical as well as individual resources, and takes place in specific contexts of interactions where situational aspects make some elements and traits more salient and relevant than others.

Learning

Drawing on the fields of cultural studies and sociocultural learning both in real and virtual contexts (Bourdieu, 1977; Gee, 2000; Gray & Tatar, 2004; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Shumar & Renninger, 2002; Swales, 2004; Wertsch, 1995), learning in this thesis can be conceptualised as a trajectory of participation in specific contexts of interaction, where expertise and knowledge acquisition are intertwined with the development of an identity and with the ability to live and communicate meaningfully in a number of communities. From this perspective, learning is about becoming a certain kind of person in a variety of cultural contexts, by making visible and recognisable a particular way of being in the world. Such process can be observed through an ethnographic approach which can account for the complex symbolic and discursive aspects interacting together.

Another important point of this chapter is that online communities can be better conceptualised as affinity spaces (Gee, 2005) loosely interconnected in networks, forming complex, non-linear structures or patterns that reflect the nature of cultural fields, such as professional communities (teachers, psychologists, academics and so on). Using the notions outlined in this chapter, it is possible to bridge the gap that separates online and off-line contexts, by seeing them as interwoven and interdependent. Through the concepts

of network of affinity spaces, an online community of professionals, like the one analysed in this thesis, can be understood as one part of a complex semiotic field which includes other online settings, physically situated contexts and events, and the wider professional field on a national, sometimes, international level. From such a socio-cultural perspective, learning and the construction of a common identity are essential parts of the same process. Through shared practices and shared subjectivities, people learn how to participate within and across the different settings that constitute the network of affinity spaces (or the “rhizome”). Meanwhile computer-mediated communication can facilitate connections and create areas where meanings overlap and weave into each other, supporting the construction of a stable “habitus” that allows individuals and groups to behave consistently across several contexts. These theoretical suggestions will be further discussed in the following chapters, as they will be inscribed in a coherent analytical framework for the study of socio-cultural learning and identity construction in an online forum.

3 .Online communities of practice

In this chapter I will describe how the socio-cultural approach influenced the study and the design of learning through the use of information and communication technologies. I will start with a brief overview discussing some of the most significant contributions to the study of educational technologies. I will then focus on the specific influence of the socio-cultural theory, describing how researchers became familiar with concepts such as participation, community and social context. The main argument will be based on a critical evaluation of the notion of *community of practice*. This notion, as described in the previous chapters, is often used as a framework to support learning through the use of networking technologies. However, I will argue that the vagueness noted in the previous chapters has not been addressed during the transition from the “real” to “virtual”. In fact, virtual communities can even exacerbate some of the more critical aspects of the CoP framework, raising important issues directly related to the relationship between socially constructed identity, language and practice. In the conclusion, I will suggest that such relationship needs to be carefully analysed in order to understand the many, variable and sometimes unexpected ways through which the social context interacts with learning in a networked context.

3.1 *A brief history of educational technology*

The history of educational technology is not linear and it presents significant overlapping areas, but it still reflects fairly well the advancements and the “revolutions” that took place in psychology as a scientific discipline in the last 60 years: the advent of behaviourism, the cognitive revolution, the constructivist turn and the newfound interest in the role of cultural and social contexts (see Crook, 2002). The first wave of educational technology, summarised in the next paragraph, was characterised by a general shift from rigid computer-oriented approaches to more learner-oriented ones (O’Shea & Self, 1983), which were based on a cognitivist view of computers as devices for implementing not rigid, mechanistic systems but used to support the student’s own understanding and encourage original contributions.

3.1.1 From Behaviourism to Cognitivism

i. *Linear programmes*

Behaviourism informed early “linear programmes” used for teaching purposes (O’Shea & Self, 1983). These software tools were derived from the principles of operant conditioning (Skinner, 1938). According to the basic principle of operant conditioning, operant behaviour is shaped by the presentation of a reinforcing stimulus, which turns it into “respondent” behaviour. The term “operant” refers to units of behaviour which are not specifically linked to any stimulus, but act on the environment leading to a particular type of effect or consequence; on the other hand, the term “respondent” refers to units of behaviour that are elicited by a particular stimulus, usually the very same consequence produced by during the operant phase, which can have either a positive or negative reinforcing effect. In early educational settings, the type of behaviour to condition (i.e., to link to specific positive reinforcing stimuli) was obviously the production of “correct” responses. Educational software inspired by operant conditioning was based on the rigid provision of very basic feedback information (wrong answer/correct answer) following the student’s input during a highly proceduralised task.

ii. *Branching programs*

The excessive rigidity of linear programming led some to focus more on the students’ responses and their role in controlling the sequence in which learning materials were presented. This resulted in more complex “branching programs” (Ayscough, 1977). Each time the student made a mistake while learning a task through a branching program, she would not simply receive an error message, but an explanation or a suggestion, and then she would be redirected at the beginning of the whole sequence affected by the mistake in order to be retested. Alternative answers were also considered and had different effects on the presentation of materials. The emphasis was less on the “correct answer” and more on individualising the learning process to suit different types of students with different capabilities. However, learning was still seen as a linear process based on direct instruction, while the student was still a “tabula rasa” or a container to be filled with specific notions and units of knowledge.

iii. *Generative computer-assisted learning*

The increased adaptability of educational software was also at the basis of the so-called “generative computer assisted learning” (Palmer & Oldehoeft, 1975). The assumption behind this approach was that students could learn better if they were given problems at the appropriate level of difficulty. A generative program could therefore “generate” learning materials as and when it was needed during a teaching session. These programs were

not based on systematic sequences but more on patterns and general strategies, which determined the problem that was generated and given to the student to be solved. Generative programs were the first to take advantage of the processing power of computers, rather than using them only to provide very basic feedback, or to store great quantities of learning materials mechanically prompted by the students' correct or wrong answers. The computer would not only know when an answer was wrong, but also why it was wrong, because it was programmed to solve the problem itself (typical example: calculus). Therefore, in the event of a wrong answer it could generate a simpler problem based on the same pattern, and even provide step-by-step guidance as to how the problem was meant to be solved.

iv. Simulations

Another relevant contribution to the development of more "intelligent" educational technology came from simulations. These were programs in which a particular process or system was recreated in real time by the computer. The phenomena represented in these simulations were often very complex processes impossible to experience otherwise, like a nuclear reaction or space travel. For instance, McKenzie (1977) developed a simulation of the cardiac output, which would recreate in real time all the processes involved like blood streaming, cardiac rate and so on. The assumption behind simulations was that by studying them the student could gain an insight into the process or system being modelled. The student was not just a passive observer but she could also provide inputs, causing changes in the phenomena simulated by the computer and analysing the consequences.

v. Artificial intelligence

The curious and active inquiry that characterised learners' behaviour while studying simulations was directly pursued in even more imaginative and flexible approaches, the aim of which was to increase the learner's control over the automated procedure, in order to stimulate a more engaged type of learning. To do so, the computer was programmed as an artificial intelligence able to establish a partially meaningful dialogue with the student. SCHOLAR (Carbonell, 1970) and SOPHIE (Brown, Burton & Bell, 1974), for instance, were programmes simulating actual human tutors, capable of answering and asking questions in a generative and unstructured manner.

The main problem with these types of educational tools was, and still is, the difficulty in programming an AI that could engage in an actual conversation, grasping the subtleties of language like abstractions and humour.

A slightly different approach to AI was represented by *Intelligent Tutoring Systems* (see Anderson et al. 1984; Anderson et al. 1995), which attempted to recreate the one-to-one relationship of personalised tutorship through automated software. In such systems the acquisition of units of knowledge was dependent on a number of computational “rules” (e.g., if/then rules) instantiated in the software (the “tutor”) by the learner’s behaviour, e.g., when she made a mistake during a proceduralised and guided task. The electronic tutor was provided with an “ideal” model of how a given skill should be performed and how it should be instructed. The ideal model was supplemented with the various errors made by the student during the task, which would deviate from the model and constitute a “buggy” model. The tutor was capable of identifying which model was being employed, and intervene with instructional guidance every time the buggy model became prevalent.

“Intelligent” tutors proved quite effective in the teaching of basic mathematical skills (like geometry and algebra), and programming languages like LISP (List Processor), but they came under criticism for their over-individualistic approach. In fact, later studies highlighted that the simple introduction of a tutoring system in a classroom had dramatic consequences on the social and emotional dimensions, influencing motivation, enthusiasm and other aspects related to social identities and roles (Levine, Resnick & Teasley, 1991; Light & Littleton, 1997). For example, Schofield et al. (1994) found that although students in classrooms claimed that the tutoring system could never replace the teacher, they kept using it in order to seek individual assistance in a more private and less embarrassing way.

vi. *Video games*

The advent of video games in the 1970s did not go unnoticed by educational researchers. It is interesting that even the “space-invaders era” there was already a research interest into the potential contribution of video games to learning processes. The playful and intrinsically motivating elements of video games seemed to offer great potential, if only they could be harnessed for learning purposes. Malone (1980, 1981) described three characteristics of video games that help create intrinsic motivation (see Gee, 2003 for a more recent perspective on video games’ supposed benefits):

- challenge- a goal whose attainment is uncertain;
- curiosity – the gamer knows enough to have expectations about what comes next;
- fantasy – the games provoke mental images not present to the senses.

The above characteristics also fit comfortably into the idea of self-directed and exploratory learning which, thanks to Piaget’s influence (1928), was becoming increasingly prevalent in educational research. The notion of self-directed learning was also at the basis of

Seymour Papert's constructivist vision about exploration and active discovery through the support of computers, which will be object of the next paragraph.

vii. *Papert's LOGO: the influence of constructivism*

The increasing popularity of constructivism had an important influence on many of the approaches described in the previous paragraph, often inspiring the development of spaces where learners could freely and actively explore, regulating their own cognitive development in a spontaneous, playful and self-directed way (e.g. , during simulations). However, the most popular example of constructivist learning through technology is probably Seymour Papert's "learning without being taught" (Papert, 1980, p. 7). Drawing on Piaget's theory of children as builders of their own intellectual structures, Papert (1980) suggested that:

- a) children could learn how to use computers in a masterful way only relying on their intrinsic curiosity and capacity to build knowledge;
- b) computers could change the way children go about learning a wide range of skills and abilities.

To achieve his "vision", Papert developed a specific programming language (LOGO) which, in its best known feature, is based on the creative use of an onscreen "turtle". Children could input data and execute programming routines which had an immediate effect on the turtle's movements over a grid. Doing this the turtle was used as a tool capable of triggering the development of abstract and formal reasoning, through active experimentation and discovery.

However, Crook (2002) noted that even constructivist learning did not do much to shake the conception that knowledge is something that can be acquired through individual and isolated activity. Furthermore, already in the 1970s Piagetian constructivism was being criticised on the basis of an increasing interest in the socio-cultural dimension of cognitive development (Lave, 1977; Scribner & Cole, 1973).

3.2 Technology and learning: the influence of the socio-cultural approach

According to Crook (2002), the socio-cultural approach helped shift the view of knowledge as a state, to knowing as an activity: a dynamic and socially shared process. More specifically, the introduction of socio-cultural ideas brought to the forefront three

fundamental aspects that represent “ideal conditions for learning” (Crook, 2002, p. 26), each with important implications in terms of research on educational technology.

According to Crook, these conditions are:

- i. *Tool mediation*, which refers to the process through which individuals come to appropriate new technologies, and how new technologies influence the *activity* of learning (see chapter 1 for a more in-depth description of the concept of culturally mediated activity). This process underlies a view of technology as “augmentation”, which does not imply amplification of intellectual capacity, but refers to the reorganisation of learning by connecting it quickly and effectively to resources, people and outcomes.
- ii. *Participatory engagement*, which refers, partially, to the development of more interactive software through which learners can easily establish links and engage in collaborative activities. More importantly, it refers to the interaction *around* the technology, rather than *within* the technology; this type of interaction is based on the capacity to link technology-mediated activity to the actual contexts of cultural practice where learners negotiate shared meanings. Crook talks in terms of “community building software”, that is, mediational technology that supports and enhances the learning relationships that characterise real knowledge domains.
- iii. *The social context* is an overarching dimension that affects all learning relationships under a great variety of circumstances. It cannot be simplistically equated with the interpersonal dimension, with “doing stuff with other people” through collaboration and guidance. In fact, learning is a deeply social activity even when it is performed in complete isolation; there is not a single moment when learning is not embedded in some sort of social relationship, to which accountability, motivation and meaning are related. The features and the implications of the social context can be subtle and indirect; nonetheless they have a dramatic influence on the nature of participation and engagement. This applies with various degrees of intensity and with different modalities to all instances of learning through mediating technologies. For example, Crook (2002) notes how students’ reluctance to use emails to seek support from their tutors was not due to lack of familiarity with the electronic medium, but to issues of social role and identity (Crook & Webster, 1998). Tutors were perceived as busy people who could not be interrupted with an email message at any moment. At the same time, the persistence of text that characterises asynchronous CMC was quite intimidating for the students, who felt the pressure of articulating their enquiries in the best possible manner, to avoid leaving a permanent record of their “lack of cleverness”.

3.2.1 Virtual or pseudo community?

It could be argued that the influences of socio-cultural theory on the study and the design of educational technology tend to converge in notions such as online or virtual community. Cole (2002) notes that both terms “virtual” and “community” came into the English language from French and, before that, Latin (“comunitas”) and their meanings remarkably evolved during the seventeenth and eighteenth century. The concept of “community” expanded the initial reference to geographically localized social aggregates, to include in its scope the idea of a group of people with something meaningful in common or who share a sense of identity, even if they do not live in the same place. Similarly, the word “virtual” shifted from an ethical dimension (its first meaning was related to “virtuous”) to something “that is so in essence or effect, although not formally or actually, admitting of being called by the name so far as the effect or result is concerned” (Oxford English Dictionary).

The term “virtual community” has now become part of the common language; it broadly describes a group of individuals who predominantly meet on-line, developing some of the characteristics that usually identify “real communities”. One of the most popular definitions of virtual communities is Howard Rheingold’s one:

“Virtual communities are social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace” (Rheingold, 1998, introduction in <http://www.rheingold.com/vc/book/>).

Apart from the popularity of the concept, the problematic dimensions the word ‘community’ encompasses, without considering the ‘virtual’ sides, are far beyond the simplistic definition proposed by Rheingold; any attempt to analyse some of the aspects related to the idea of community should take into account its intrinsic complexity. Pargman (2000) acutely highlighted the ambivalent position the term has reached since it was analysed as a sociological issue (Tonnies, 1887-1967), to distinguish between rural communitarian aggregates (Gemeinshafts), based on strong personal links and human-sized structures, and modern urban societies (Gesellshafts), characterized by super-formal and abstract dynamics. Since then the concept developed in so many and diverse directions and assuming so many meanings, it has now become extremely far-reaching and, at the same time, almost meaningless. Ryan (1997, quoted in Pargman, 2000) noted that:

“the idea of community is [...] so loose that any sort of common concern may in principle give rise to the locution of the ‘x-ing community’ where x can be almost everything you care to think of – the knitting community or the snorkelling community as readily as the Heidegger-reading community” (Ryan, 1997, p.1168-1169).

Such problems are equally, maybe more, relevant within a virtual environment. The impressive proliferation of “communities” on the web can be witnessed by simply typing the word in a search engine; almost every commercial website offers now some form of “communitarian” interaction whose purpose is often, as Shumar and Renninger (2002) noted, just to invite users to get information from each other, rather than taking up the valuable time of busy call centre and helpdesk operators.

Shumar and Renninger (2002) also acknowledged that some credit should be given to one of the main criticisms addressed to the concept of virtual community; this criticism argues that the principle of “shared set of interests”, upon which the majority of such communities are based on, is a fairly shallow and naïve framework: communities imply, in fact, much more wide and complex dimensions, ranging from the mutual use of physical resources and needs, to the implementation of a social organisation including political, economic and administrative layers. They also pointed out, however, that the exclusive reference to co-presence in an organised environment might overlook the symbolic and intangible aspects that a community always entails, which become almost pervasive in the virtual environment.

When people online come to call themselves “a community” they are sharing a set of meanings about the concept of community, which affects how interactions are subsequently symbolised and contextualised. Such meanings are informed by the common definitions of community originated in the official sociological literature and influenced by the social, symbolic and sometimes naïve representations of these definitions.

Virtual communities, hence, are intrinsically constructed dimensions, whose characteristics, and whose inherent “reality”, are the result of the symbolic activity of the members who constitute them. This entails the awareness that virtual communities, even more than real ones, cannot be studied “from the outside” but necessitate a deep and inclusive analysis of the meanings and symbols shared by the people involved. I do not intend, on such basis, to argue about whether or not virtual communities constitute actual or “pseudo” communities: the latest and more extreme expression of the impersonal and alienating *Gesellschafts* we live in (Beniger, 1987), as I share Jones’ (1995) opinion on the matter:

” Even if is that the case, the most important question is: how is it that a mass media can be so closely related to (in some cases, equated with) a community?” (Jones, 1995, p. 18).

3.2.2 Shared knowledge and communities

There are many instances that illustrate how the introduction of socio-cultural ideas, in particular that of “community”, had an influence on the study and the design of educational technology (see Sawyer, 2006 for a very general overview). In this paragraph I will briefly describe a particularly influential example, while the rest of the chapter will adopt a more critical viewpoint in order to present some of the issues that will gradually lead to the empirical section of the thesis.

Scardamalia and Bereiter’s notion of knowledge building communities (1994, 2003) represents a relevant attempt to bring together the constructivist principle of active construction of knowledge, with the socio-cultural emphasis on social participation. The notion of knowledge building community is related to (perhaps inspired by) Brown and Campione’s idea of “learning communities”. Brown and Campione (1990) found that children had difficulty in understanding lengthy and complex texts when they relied solely on their subjective judgement, so they began a series of studies attempting to bring children together in meaningful collaborative activities that not only would support their textual comprehension, but would also enable them to enact roles typical of a research community. To achieve their goal, Brown and Campione modelled classroom activities to resemble prototypical research activities like seminars and workshops (for a detailed account see Brown & Campione, 1990).

These collaborative activities were based on dialogue and free inquiry and featured students as researchers and teachers, partially responsible for designing their own curriculum. From a theoretical point of view, Brown and Campione’s aim was to create a series of overlapping “zones of proximal development” (Vygotsky, 1978), where students could follow different routes at different paces in order to maximise the learning opportunities for the whole community. However, children were not expected to take complete responsibility for their learning. In fact, Brown and Campione stressed the importance of adult guidance during all collaborative activities, and the benefits of involving older students who acted as discussion leaders and tutors throughout the projects.

The notion of knowledge building community (KBC) is not dramatically different from that of learning community, except for the way technology is included into the equation, which obviously adds some very significant elements. In a KBC knowledge represents a collective goal and technology provides the means to create and sustain collaborative inquiry in ways that resemble real-life knowledge-advancing enterprises. The aim is to help students to act and think like researchers, with the same tension towards creativity and open discussion.

From a theoretical point of view, the notion of KBC is based on the distinction between first-order and second-order learning environments (Scardamalia & Bereiter, 1994). First-order environments are based on the progressive adaptation to the routines and the agreed standards of an institutional context. In these environments learning is a static activity through which fixed targets are achieved adopting a passive and conformist behaviour: memorizing, practicing and acquiring skills and notions. The prototypical example of first-order learning environment is the traditional, curriculum based classroom.

On the other hand, second-order environments are based on the assumption that the participants' accomplishments keep raising the overall standards that regulate learning. In these environments individuals are expected to make intentional and original contributions to the collective knowledge to sustain its continuous advancement. The perfect example of second-order learning is the way scientific communities organise and evaluate themselves in order to encourage the production of new knowledge.

According to Scardamalia and Bereiter (1994), educational research should support the transformation of schools from first-order to second-order learning environments. They claim that information and communication technologies could become a powerful tool in this sense, through the constitutions of "Computer-Supported Intentional Learning Environments" (CSILEs), the best-known expression of which is the Knowledge Forum (www.knowledgetforum.com). More specifically, Scardamalia and Bereiter suggested that the use of technology facilitates decentralized and open knowledge building, shifting the focus on the collective and distributed quality of cognition. For example, the use of asynchronous CMC eliminates turn-taking problems during discussions, as students can post comments and queries all at the same time in a much more open and uninhibited process. Moreover, asynchronous CMC provides opportunities for reflection, due again to its specific features like extended time span of the discussions and persistence of the texts (see also Hawkes & Romiszowsky, 2001; McIntyre & Tlusty, 1995).

In a CSILE Students are encouraged to produce notes and write comments that are included into a common database accessible at any time. The contributions are evaluated through a process that resembles peer-review in scientific journals, and the most "high

ranking” ones undergo a further refinement process that, eventually, results in their “publication”. Published contributions represent the actual level of knowledge advancement achieved by the community as a whole, and they are kept in the database as a repository accessible by other communities that can use them as a basis to expand even further the knowledge building process.

The creation of knowledge building communities implies identifying and supporting the social dimension of learning rather than focusing solely on individual dispositions and abilities. Scardamalia and Bereiter also stressed the importance of making explicit the tacit and informal knowledge brought by individuals into the context. According to them, leveraging this type of knowledge allows recreating the curious and open character of scientific inquiry, and it leads to relationships based on mutual engagement and enthusiasm.

3.3 Online communities of practice

Thanks to the influence of the socio-cultural perspective, the notion of community is nowadays very popular in education and a great deal of research is being carried out both in traditional and ICT-mediated contexts. I have already mentioned communities of learners and knowledge building communities; other approaches (e.g. Kim, 2000) are even more explicitly interested in how online communities could be designed and managed, while others have a more theoretical or explorative connotation (Hakken, 1999; Jones, 1999), and some analyse instead the impact of online communities on other institutions (Werry & Mowbray, 2001). However, there is a recurrent aspect in the literature, on which I wish to turn now some critical attention: the notion of *Community of Practice* (CoP). This notion, which was described in detail in the previous chapters, is often viewed as a distinct framework for supporting professional development through the use of networking technologies (Barab & Duffy, 2000; Johnson, 2001; Lewis & Allan, 2005; Preece, 2000).

According to Wenger (1998), calling every imaginable social configuration a community of practice could render the concept meaningless. CoPs are inevitably “local”; they are based on sustained engagement in specific situated practices, in the emergence of tacit understanding, conviviality, community lore and so on. However, Wenger also claimed that the “geography of practice cannot be reduced to notions of locality and proximity” (Wenger, 1998, p. 130). Within shared practices the dimension of locality is primarily defined by learning, seen as increasing, more competent and legitimate participation and, most importantly, as identity construction.

This type of learning allows the emergence of practices' landscape, sometimes creating an unconventional topography. For instance, classic studies (e.g., Turkle, 1995) showed how people develop sustained engagement in virtual settings, increasing their participation and constructing identity, through a process that turns a virtual environment in an actual place and creates the "locality" necessary to the emergence of a community.

Baym's analysis (1995) of how an American newsgroup of soap-opera lovers turned into an actual online community of practice is a good example. In her study, Baym (ibid.) noted the importance of external contexts of discursive practice in providing the background against which interaction in the new computer-mediated context develops. She suggested that CMC's use is always linked to the original cultures of which participants are members. The language of soap opera fans, for instance, presents some recurrent elements (like the way stereotypical characters are represented, or a generally ironical attitude) that were systematically re-used when the fans studied by Baym went on-line.

One of the most interesting aspects of Baym's analysis is her use of the anthropological concept of appropriation, which in her work refers to how people develop a skilful and personalised relationship with the technological system. She observed how participants in the on-line discourse "exploited" the various technological features offered by the on-line environment to explore different expressive possibilities, different public identities and relationships. Through complex procedures of naming, identification signs, textual and graphic conventions (emoticons, etc.), they engaged in an activity of negotiation of meanings that led to the emergence of the community, which became at the same time self-sustaining and intrinsically dependent on the original contexts and practices. Baym suggested that to reach a full understanding of virtual communities is indispensable, on the one hand, to relate them to the "real" communities they refer to; on the other hand, it also necessary to see them as independent phenomena, neither better nor worse than the offline counterparts, but definitely different.

3.3.1 Designing Online CoPs

In this paragraph I will describe some design-based research on online CoPs. Johnson (2001) noted that this type of research appears to rely almost exclusively on the analysis of case studies, in which CoPs are usually seen as phenomena that might or might not "emerge" from virtual communities. While it seems to be possible to design a virtual community following a prescriptive approach (e.g., Palloff & Pratt, 1999), it appears that CoPs are much more elusive and dependent on contingent and variable factors.

In one of the cases reported by Johnson, Ricketts et al. (2000) described the problems experienced and the lessons learned while trying to set up an online introductory course in nutrition for post-secondary students. The course was organised by the Department of Nutritional Sciences at the University of Arizona. The authors drew on Lave and Wenger's situated learning perspective, suggesting that successful online learning can be achieved creating environments where participants can engage in shared, meaningful activities that define their membership and their identities, possibly leading directly to employment. According to Ricketts and colleagues the specific nature of CMC can facilitate the creation of such environments. For instance, the nature of hypertext-based communication offers opportunities for exploration and deep learning, and enables students to take direct responsibility of their own learning. This approach, according to the authors, supports situated learning by embedding educational activities into practical, realistic settings. Furthermore, asynchronous CMC also increases the sense of safety giving learners the opportunity to remain anonymous or give additional thought to their contributions.

In another case study, Borthick and Jones (2000) described the setting-up of an online master's course in information systems assurance at Georgia State University. This study was based on the concept of "online collaborative discovery learning", a process through which participants learn to recognise a problem and how to tackle it by developing a solution strategy, while working and interacting together in an "online community of practice".

According to Borthick and Jones, online learning should support participation in communities of practice, in which members learn from each other by working together, developing a common sense of purpose and a common way of thinking about problems. During the online course, students solved problems in increasingly richer contexts with a constant focus on real-life challenges. These problems included assessing risks, evaluating internal control, developing and evaluating actual assurance plans. Borthick and Jones argued that "online collaborative discovery learning" is more effective than traditional, lecture-based instruction, especially to develop problem-solving skills. It also offers advantages in terms of cost reduction, while at the same time helping students to prepare for actual work environments in which new problems arise continuously.

The literature about design-based research on online CoPs is full of enthusiastic and well meant efforts, like the one I have just summarised, but it also reveals an "inconvenient truth" about online CoP research: the CoP notion, due its fluid and undeniably vague theoretical definition, can be easily accommodated to a varied range of research objectives, and therefore proved to be very useful as a "buzzword" to add some spin to even the most basic e-learning course evaluation study.

There are, however, some significant cases in which ideas of practice and community have been theoretically integrated into the empirical projects. Barab, Makinster and Scheckler (2004), for instance, discussed many of the challenges and the risks that arose during the development of an online environment for maths and science teachers: the Inquiry Learning Forum (<http://ilf.crlt.indiana.edu>). This forum was based on virtual classrooms where members could engage in collaboration and reflective discussions about teaching practices. Barab et al. (ibid) applied the following definition of community of practice to their online environment:

"We define a CoP as a persistent, sustained social network of individuals, who share and develop an overlapping knowledge base set of beliefs, history and experiences focused on a common practice and/or mutual enterprise (...) much like a living organism, they are self-organizing and cannot be designed *prima facie*. They grow, evolve and change dynamically, transcending any particular task and outliving any particular member" (Barab et al., 2004, p. 55).

Their approach to the design of online COP is based on the identification within a virtual environment of "system tensions" (Engeström, 1987) or "dualities" (Wenger, 1998), which allow for a better understanding of the life-cycles of community systems. These dualities refer to conflicting activities or dimensions which interact dynamically and lead, in the authors' view, to the emergence of an online community of practice.

Drawing heavily on Wenger's work they defined these dualities as:

- Designed/emergent, which refers to the tension between what is designed, and what actually tends to emerge from the design, in sometimes unpredictable ways.
- Participation/reification, which refers to the interplay between actual participation in the activity of negotiation of meanings, and the tendency to congeal those meanings into "reifications", like official documents and formal interpretations.
- Local/global, which refers to the interplay between the day-by-day dimension, with its demands and routines, and the wider dimension of the "general implications", where people need to become aware that their activities and identities are part of a larger picture.
- Identification/Negotiability, which refers to the interplay between the process of identification with a community's culture and history, and the willingness to take ownership of and responsibility for the meanings negotiated in the community, playing a more integrated role in the activities.

- Online/face-to-face; this refers to the interplay between online and co-present participation, and has implications in terms of trust among members who never meet in real life, and in terms of familiarity with technical tools which affect the degree and the quality of online participation.
- Diversity/coherence; this is related to the designed/emergent tension and refers to the interplay between the amount of diversity and dynamism allowed in a community and the level of control over activities in order to maintain a consistent direction and avoid chaos.

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Barab et al. (ibid) suggest that those interested in researching and fostering online CoPs should keep a firm focus on these dualities, and adopt a flexible approach allowing them to interact, and sometimes conflict. For example, they recommend the use of minimal, non-imposing designs, which support “emergent” qualities and allow members to take the community into unexpected directions (provided, of course, that these new directions do not contradict the basic principles and aims underlying participation). They recommend to carefully manage the tendency to produce artefacts like reports, documents or even publishable papers based on empirical studies, which can crystallise communities, reducing their dynamism and potentially killing participation. They stress the importance of encouraging discussions where the general implications of daily practices can be explored, and where members can negotiate ways to relate to each others’ experiences. They highlight the importance of fostering the process of identification with a community, because increased identification will lead to increased involvement and commitment. Finally, they draw attention to the risks that could hinder online participation, mostly the difficulty in creating the type of trustful exchanges that characterize face to face relationships.

3.3.2 Online CoPs: some unanswered questions

Although studies like Barab et al.’s (2004) represent a more rigorous attempt to apply the CoP framework to foster online collaborative communities (see Barab, Kling & Gray, 2004 for other examples), the vagueness noted in the previous chapters has not been addressed during the transition from the “real” to “virtual”. In fact, virtual communities can even exacerbate some of the more critical aspects of the CoP framework, raising important issues directly related to the relationship between identity, language and practice.

To begin with, the online communities of practice that can be found in the literature still seem to operate in a social vacuum, and although the “connections” with the wider socio-

cultural context is usually acknowledged, it is inadequately accounted for. In fact, online CoPs are rarely, if ever, the locus of an “actual practice” (at least not according to the dualistic model that separates “participation” from “reification”); they usually represent a symbolic space where practices are objects of a reflexive, discursive dialogue (see also Goodfellow, 2003). This begs the question of what is actually going on in networked contexts: if members online simply “talk about practices”, does this dialogic activity define their membership and their identities differently from the membership and the identities defined in “real life” contexts of practice?

Until we reconsider Wenger’s separation between language and activities, in order to see them as deeply intertwined into a unified “discursive” process, this “paradox” will be very hard to solve and will lead to unnecessary complication, as already mentioned in the discussion about the A.A. community (see previous chapters). It is worth noting that this is not just a theoretical, abstract concern. Few would disagree that online CoPs cannot be adequately fostered and supported until we achieve a satisfactory understanding of what is actually happening in them. The following is an example illustrating this crucial point.

Laferrière et al. (2004) described the constitution in Canada of a large “tele-collaborative” community of practice for teachers, based on the use of electronic networks for information sharing and online social interaction: the TACT (Technology for Advanced Collaboration among Teachers) community, a project that began in 1995. This tele-collaborative CoP was based upon a communal endeavour to gain an insight into the use of digital technologies for learning and teaching. In-service and pre-service teachers would engage together in the use of a number of digital technologies, “talking about” the possible implications for actual teaching. The assumption guiding the project was “the more access to digital technology, the more (teachers) could explore possibilities of its use” (Laferrière et al., 2004, p. 270).

Using Wenger’s (1998) analytical framework, Laferrière et al. identified the following aspects that led to the emergence of the community:

- the mutual engagement in a shared online discourse, expressed through active posting in an asynchronous forum;
- the joint enterprise defined by a specific shared goal: learning to conduct collaborative project-based learning;
- the shared repertoire of resources offered by the TACT environment, and by the adoption of a common language;
- the reification process, which in their case study refers to the production of reports and other texts that crystallised participation in symbolic “artefacts”;
- the establishment of a local “regime of competence”, defined by newcomers

becoming increasingly competent in the use of technology through the support of already experienced members.

The critical point, to which I wish to draw the reader's attention, is that Laferrière's case study seems to be based on two different, and independent, levels of analysis. On the one hand, there is the online level where the practices, and the related identities, are defined by getting directly engaged in digital technologies, and then "talking about" the implications for teaching. On the other hand, there is the level of the local teaching practices and identities, that is, the actual schools with their day-by-day activities, with their peculiar forms of engagement and their situated meanings.

Although being a teacher was a precondition to access the tele-collaborative community, participation and learning in the virtual and in the situated contexts seem clearly distinct. In fact, a teacher could become a full member in the online CoP, without ever having used technology in her actual teaching practice.

This leaves a number of important questions unanswered: why did teachers choose to spend time and efforts in this type of community? How did online participation relate to the actual, situated teaching situations in the real schools where teachers presumably worked? How did their membership in the online CoP fit into their "being teachers", and in their personally and/or socially defined trajectories of participation within the professional community of teachers? In simpler words, what is the relationship between the "real" world and the "virtual" one? Furthermore, despite mentioning the importance of the online discourse in facilitating the negotiation of meanings, the authors never attempt to explore the nature of this discourse, in order to understand its influence on teachers' identities.

The issues raised above had an important influence in shaping the empirical section of this thesis and the ensuing discussion. In my opinion, such issues could be addressed by taking into account the subtle and indirect ways through which the social context affects participation in a networked context. By this I mean that research on online "communities of practice" cannot overlook the multiple relationships that link together actual fields of practice, wider socio-cultural contexts, and ICT-mediated environments.

These relationships, which manifest themselves in complex dynamics of participation and membership, can be analysed only through a theoretical and methodological framework in which practice and symbolic interactions are inextricably bound to each other. This leads to the choice to focus on identity and, in particular, on socially and discursively constructed identities. Identity, as observed in many of the examples discussed in this and in the previous chapters, is often the "nexus" where the different threads so far

considered (practice, language, discourse and so on) converge and weave into each other. Alcoholics Anonymous, insurance claims processors, digital teachers and so on; in all those cases socially constructed identity emerged as a critical dimension having both explicit and implicit influences on participation, engagement and learning. It follows that focusing on whether, and how, identities are constructed can provide us with a vantage point to observe the many, variable and sometimes unexpected ways through which the social context interact with learning in a networked context.

Summary

In this chapter I have described how the socio-cultural approach influenced research on, and design of, educational technology. The first part of the chapter provided a general historical frame, briefly outlining the theoretical advancements that informed some of the most relevant empirical attempts. The second part of the chapter described how the introduction of socio-cultural ideas helped shifting the focus on the social dimension of learning in ICT-mediated environments, highlighting the importance of the social context. The chapter's main argument is based on a critical discussion about online communities of practice, and it draws directly on the points noted in the previous chapters.

The chapter's main point is that the relationship between identity, discourse and practice has a fundamental role in creating and supporting an online community, seen as a networked system of meanings. Analysing this relationship, and its links with the wider socio-cultural context, we can perhaps identify the resources employed by members of this system to interpret and enact their participation. The next chapter will elaborate on the suggestions made so far, in order to define a suitable methodological framework prior to the empirical section.

4. Discourse analysis: a methodology to study the construction of a common identity

The previous chapters introduced the socio-cultural approach in learning research and explored the CoP (Communities of Practices) model as an interpretive framework for the thesis. A number of issues were discussed, mostly linked to the complex relationship between practice and language; the main suggestion was that a focus on discourse appears to be the best way to answer the research question (is a common identity constructed by participants interacting in a specific online, collaborative environment?). In this chapter I will elaborate and expand on that suggestion, identifying which type of discourse analysis is more appropriate to study whether, and how, a common identity is constructed in an online, participatory context. I will begin with a general introduction describing different approaches to discourse analysis, including computer-mediated discourse analysis, before focusing on one specific model: James Gee's ethnographic discourse analysis. I will describe Gee's analytic framework in detail and provide an example. In the concluding section, I will consider alternative options in order to draw a complete and satisfactory methodological scenario.

4.1 What is discourse analysis?

As briefly mentioned in the first chapter, this thesis views discourse as a constructive and transformative practice, and treats it as the main unit of analysis. Unfortunately, discourse analysis is a method that poses more than a few problems due to the existence of many different approaches, which are sometimes conflicting, and often very specific to particular fields of inquiry and research interests. Furthermore, the application of such a method to computer mediated discourse requires additional clarification.

It can be a good idea to start with what Taylor (2001) calls a "loose definition": "discourse analysis is the close study of language in use" (Taylor, 2001, p. 5). Having said that, another question ensues: what is language? The simplest, widespread and perhaps most obvious answer is that language is communication, the transmission of meanings between

two or more interlocutors. Nowadays, this view of language is seen as inadequate and simplistic. The first and most relevant criticism is that language involves not just transmission but also construction, renegotiation and, most importantly, it is a form of action (Austin, 1975). Alongside such criticism there is the suggestion that language is inextricably bound up with our social realities and our mental processes (see Vygotsky, 1962). Languages are “forms of life” (Wittgenstein, 1953), inseparable from who we are and what we do in our social worlds. From such a perspective, language itself becomes just one aspect of a more sophisticated “discourse” (Foucault, 1977) involving also ways of acting, thinking and behaving.

In sum, discourse can be seen as a multidimensional activity dealing with social interactions and mutually constructed meanings in a variety of ways, where the language we speak is a central but not isolated aspect. Due to its variability, it follows that discourse cannot be analysed as a static phenomenon but it requires a degree of “flexibility”, which ultimately is directly related to the nature of the research question being investigated. On a very general level, it could be argued that all research questions based on a discursive approach are always rooted in the necessity of finding some kind of patterns within the data analysed. In this respect, Taylor (2001) describes four approaches to discourse analysis, all equally legitimate from a theoretical and methodological point of view, which differ in the types of patterns they try to identify. What follows is a brief description of the four approaches. Obviously, it is not an exhaustive review of the discourse analytic literature, which would be just beyond the scope of this chapter.

i) Micro-linguistic patterns

In the first place, there are the micro-linguistic patterns, i.e. the reoccurring variations, traditionally studied by sociolinguists (see Coulthard, 1992; Stubbs, 1996), in the constitutive elements of languages, like for example grammatical and syntactical units (vocabulary, structure etc.). This approach is usually concerned with counting and measuring specific linguistic features, often observed in large datasets (called corpora) through quantitative methods. A most basic application of this method would be the study of the structural differences between written and spoken language, trying to identify the social and psychological implications.

ii) Activity patterns

Secondly, there are activity patterns, namely the reoccurring variations in what people do through language which, in this case, is seen as a dynamic process based on continuous, circular exchanges between the interlocutors. This approach includes conversation analysis and discursive psychology, which differ significantly in their objectives and their

assumptions. Conversation analysis is the sequential study of utterances and turn-taking during real life interactions. Its aim is to understand the organised and partially unconscious “stratagems” employed, on a moment-by-moment basis, to achieve a certain goal during a conversation; for example, to avoid giving one’s name during an anonymous call to the police (see Sacks, 1992). On the other hand, discursive psychology (see Edwards, 1997; Edwards & Potter, 1992; Potter, 1996) focuses on the situated discursive practices used to build a certain version of reality, to justify and legitimate claims, to blame others and categorise their actions as driven by personal interests and “stakes”. Such practices can be either employed by specific people, like the late princess Diana (Abell & Stokoe, 1999) or the former US president Bill Clinton (Locke & Edwards, 2003), or by groups within specific areas and situations, like for example within the racist discourse of white New-Zealanders talking about their relationship with the Maori minority (Wetherell & Potter, 1992).

iii) Specific cultural and communicative patterns

The third type of pattern is concerned with the recurring variations within a specific cultural field, or within wider activity contexts, like for example the linguistic and communicative patterns that characterise professions (lawyers, doctors, psychologists) or cultural topics (like the language of the internet: browsing, surfing, etc.). A key concept is that of Interpretive Repertoire (Gilbert & Mulkay, 1984), which refers to a relatively coherent and organised way of talking, or writing, about something. Interpretive Repertoires constitute culturally informed, readily available resources through which people construct and negotiate their social reality; they are the “building blocks of conversation” (Edley, 2001, p. 198). For example, in the cultural context of feminism, femininity represents a set of interpretive resources, influenced by history and culture, to construct women in a certain way. Themes could be: oppression, emancipation, sexuality, and so on. When seen as a culturally specific interpretive repertoire, femininity ceases to be a physiologically determined condition to become one possible alternative, among many, to create and manage identities and relationships.

iv) Broader cultural patterns

Finally, some forms of discourse analysis focus on general cultural patterns, such as recurring variations in the relationship between language and general social processes. Such variations may be concerned with the ways people construct each other according to social class, race or even according to implicit, culture-specific ontological assumptions about human nature like, for instance, the western view about the separation between mind and body. This approach is usually adopted by critical discourse analysis (See Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999; Fairclough, 1992), which assumes that language is

deeply intertwined with dynamics of power and oppression, and firmly believes in the emancipatory function of social research and in its potential role in supporting social change. A central concept in critical DA is that of semiosis, a general notion encompassing “all possible forms of meaning – visual images and body language as well as verbal language” (Fairclough, 1989, p. 234). Semiosis is usually articulated through “genres” and “discourses”. Genres are the different ways through which things are done and said, and social life is organised, examples are everyday conversations, official meetings, and so on. Discourses are, on the other hand, ideologically defined systems of knowledge (see also Foucault, 1977, 1989), implemented to justify the status quo, and to “naturalise” (make seem as natural and inevitable) the unequal distribution of power and resources. The critical analyst’s task is to study the network of genres and discourses in order to understand how activities are organised, how texts are produced, and identities are constructed. An example of critical discourse analysis is Fairclough’s description (2000) of the neo-liberal social order, with its genres (“team-work”, “partnerships”, “board meetings”, the “corporate speech”, and so on) and its discourses (the narratives of progress and competition, the inevitability of the “globalised world”, the omnipresence of concept of “flexibility”, and so forth).

Before continuing, it is important to note that many discourse analysts would define the nature of their inquiry as critical or political. This stems from the inspiring role played by critical theory in defining the very epistemological basis of a large portion of contemporary discourse analysis. In fact, if a common thread linking together various discourse analytic approaches could be identified, this would be the ultimate aim driving the research endeavour: to study social reality through a critical understanding of the context and the actors involved, including the researcher her/himself. Such a aim is, inevitably, politic; it is always based on the analysis of what is normative in a certain situation, what it is said and what is left out or relegated in the background, what is acceptable, how things should be done, how groups identify themselves and are identified according to the unequal distribution of power and resources.

As for the study of a common identity, all the four approaches could serve the purpose; it depends on what dimension of identity one is interested in. For example, a micro-linguistic approach would be appropriate to analyse the variations in identity *expression* between different types of communication (face to face, telephonic, and so on). This could be achieved by measuring (coding and counting) how personal pronouns are used within large linguistic datasets, with the help of ad-hoc software. A specific study carried out in the context of computer-mediated communication will be discussed later in this chapter. Other studies have looked at identity from a perspective akin to discursive psychology (the second approach), analysing the shifting of subject positions during specific dialogic

interactions: how people position themselves during discursive exchanges in order to achieve specific objectives (Harré & Langenhove, 1999).

To study the *construction* of a common identity through discourse we should probably redirect our attention to what people say (and do) in their cultures, trying to understand how they define “who they are” when they are engaged together in meaningful discursive practices. From this point of view a focus on communicative and cultural patterns (the third and the fourth approaches) would probably be more suited. However, before showing commitment to one or more approaches another issue needs to be explored. The aim in this thesis is to investigate identity in a very particular situation: an online networked environment. For this reason, the next section will discuss the application of discourse analysis to computer-mediated communication.

4.2 Computer Mediated Discourse Analysis

Is the analysis of computer-mediated discourse the same thing as “traditional” discourse analysis? Before answering the question we need a viable definition of computer-mediated discourse. Herring (2001) proposed the following:

“Computer-mediated discourse is the communication produced when human beings interact with one another by transmitting messages via networked computers. The study of computer-mediated discourse (henceforth CMD) is a specialization within the broader interdisciplinary study of computer-mediated communication (CMC), distinguished by its focus on language and language use in computer networked environments, and by its use of methods of discourse analysis to address that focus”. (Herring, 2001, p. 612).

The history of networked discourse is, obviously, the history of the Internet, from its earlier stages as a US military project (ARPANET), to the explosion of the World Wide Web. Herring noted that alongside the internet as a multi-dimensional phenomenon (social, technological, economical, cultural, linguistic, and so on), there was the development of a new research paradigm to study the nature of computer mediated discourse. Soon there was the constitution of an active and multi-disciplinary community working on the “emergent genre”, and a wave of studies that resulted in a significant body of literature.

Much of the early research was characterised by a fairly negative outlook, and keen to over-generalise on the basis of the more superficial and popular aspects of networked discourse. For instance, Baron (1984) claimed that Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) represented an “impoverished” form of communication, limited by its total reliance on typed text, and totally unsuited to the sophisticated social interactions achievable through traditional face-to-face communication, which was seen as a “rich” medium where information is available through multiple channels: visual, auditory, gestural, etc.

This view was soon challenged by rapid technological developments and by less superficial research that highlighted the expressive nature of networked CMC, where emotional barriers could be overcome and even deep relationships were possible (McKenna et al., 2002; Scharlott & Christ, 1995; Whitty & Gavin, 2001), and where identities and gender could be easily renegotiated (Turkle, 1995).

Traditional categorizations of CMC tended to favour technological features and linguistic properties; for example, some of the more established, and still widespread, definitions are those related to the concept of synchronicity: “synchronous” communications are those where interaction occurs in real time, and “asynchronous” are those where interaction does not occur simultaneously. Although such distinctions are still useful, swift changes in technology are already rendering them blurred and problematic. As Postmes et al. noted (1998), the computer is increasingly evolving as the perfect “Turing Machine” (see Turing, 1938), i.e. a sort of universal medium that is theoretically capable of hosting, processing and transforming all conceivable forms of human communication.

In fact, there are already several dimensions of contemporary CMC communication which are not appropriately captured by traditional categorizations. Just two examples: the huge success of VoIP (Voice over Internet Protocol) software like Skype, heralded a new era for telephonic communication, which is specific in its own right and could barely be contained within the “synchronous” box. Similarly, the spreading of professional blogging and media pod-casting is related to the evolution of traditional, one-to many, mass-media journalism, and it is just not adequately described by the concept of “asynchronous”. This has at least two important consequences; from a descriptive point of view, every definition based on a set of limited categories (like synchronous and asynchronous) is somewhat simplistic and reductive; from a methodological point of view, it becomes evident that such a complex and diverse scenario demands a flexible and critical approach, where the interpretive work of the analyst is essential.

Similarly, Herring (2004) noted that CMD (Computer Mediated Discourse) is a varied field, and that simplistic, all-encompassing descriptions should be avoided. Given such variety, it is unlikely that a single “best method” could be devised, while it is much more

appropriate to adopt a flexible approach, drawing on the different frameworks within discourse analysis. More specifically, she suggested that computer-mediated discourse analysis can be applied to four domains of language (structure, meaning, interactions and social behaviour) focusing in each case on a specific unit of analysis and favouring different research issues and different analytic tools. The following table summarises the four areas, each with the related phenomena and issues that could be studied, and with a list of possible discursive methods to tackle those issues.

	Phenomena	Issues	Methods
Structure	Typography, orthography, morphology, syntax, discourse schemata.	Genre characteristics, orality, efficiency, expressivity, complexity.	Structural/descriptive linguistics, text analysis, semantics, pragmatics.
Meaning	Meaning of words, utterances (speech acts), macrosegments.	What the speaker intends what is accomplished through language.	Semantics, pragmatics.
Interaction	Turns, sequences, exchanges, threads.	Interactivity, timing, coherence, interaction as co- constructed, topic development.	Conversation analysis Ethnomethodology.
Social behaviour	Linguistic expression of status, conflict negotiation, face	Social dynamics, power, influence, identity.	Interactional sociolinguistics, critical discourse analysis.

Table 4.1 The four domains of CMDA (Herring, 2004, p.360).

The four domains in Table 3.1 bear some resemblance to the four areas described by Taylor (see earlier section) in the context of “traditional” discourse analysis. Of course there are differences, but overall it could be argued that in the CMC field discourse analytic methods can be located on a continuum of sorts. This stretches from the study of linguistic structures to a focus on actual interactions and to what is accomplished through them, to an interest in the wider “social” dimension, where culturally defined identities, power relations and other related aspects can be studied. Therefore, we could conclude that there are no significant differences between CMC and traditional, physical contexts for conducting DA, at least in terms of the general analytic strategies a researcher could use.

However, this does not mean that virtual contexts do not offer specific challenges and opportunities to a discourse analyst. The internet is both a technologic and a symbolic system, and the two dimensions are deeply intertwined. Any method of inquiry should consider the associated issues and implications: bandwidth, hardware and software affect meanings, expressive possibilities and the depth of the on-line conversations and interactions. The researcher faces a particular challenge here, which is a characteristic of discourse analysis in naturalistic settings but acquires a specific relevance in CMC environments. As Simpson (2003) noted, the amount of collectable CMC data can be enormous: “logs of chats, recording of voice conferences, videos of on-screen interactions, recordings of key-strokes, videos of individual participants interacting at the computer, and so on” (Simpson, 2003, p. 6). This happens because the nature of the medium allows the ready availability of an impressive, sometimes overwhelming amount of information. Focusing exclusively on the wealth of information at hand could lead a researcher to ignore fundamental contextual factors, and this would inevitably reduce the quality of the findings. According to Simpson, the cyber-discourse analyst must prove capable of difficult decisions, always trying to reach a compromise between the risks of neglecting important contextual factors and the temptation to overanalyse the context.

One last consideration must be made about the problematic passage from the field -texts to the research texts, which involves the passage from transcribed data to a more meaningful and theoretical form. In this respect, Mann and Stewart (2000) noted that

moving from data to theory in conventional FTF (Face-to-Face) research involves the reconstitution as text of oral data and non-verbal behaviours, a process that sometimes leads the researcher to make arbitrary assessments about participants' reactions and emotions. In contrast, the nature of CMC allows for the direct and explicit action on the source material, which can be stored (i.e., saved) "as it is" and be easily retrieved for analytic purposes. The implication, according to Mann and Stewart, is that the researcher can avoid the risks of transforming 'reality' into text, altering the data with her own theoretical and methodological choices; on this basis they conclude that CMC, with its ability of producing detailed, open and reflective data, might prove a richer and more reliable source for discourse analysis than "naturalistic" settings.

4.3 Narrowing the focus: James Gee's discourse analysis

As mentioned in the introduction, the objective in this chapter is to identify a methodology to study the construction of a common identity in an online context. Discourse analysis proved to be a viable framework which can be applied to CMC contexts, provided that the specific socio-technical features of the medium are taken into account. Now, the task is to identify the approach most suited to explore the research question. For this reason, I will introduce James Gee's concepts of D-identities and recognition work (1998, 1999, 2000-2001,), which constitute the backbone of his discourse analytic method.

According to Gee, identity could be used as an analytic tool to address several issues in education; to start with, he described four perspectives from which we can view identity: nature, institution, affinity and Discourse (note the capital "D"). Natural identities are "given", that is, they are determined by nature (like being a natural twin). Institutional identities are assigned and authorised by institutions, and while sometimes they are imposed (like in the prisoner's case), more often they are willingly, sometimes enthusiastically, appropriated (like for managers in a company). Affinity identities emerge from sharing and participating in specific experiences and practices (like being involved in star-trek fan groups, where membership and identity are determined by sharing some basic interests and by being engaged in specific practices: attending gatherings, dressing up, collecting memorabilia, and so on).

In reality, these different identities are not separated from each other, they often coexist and, usually, tend to "collapse" in Discourse identities, i.e. they rely on dialogue and communication to be recognised as such. They are, in other words, actively constructed and negotiated through symbolic interaction, even in the case of natural identities. Being a natural twin is not a defining aspect of one's identity in itself, it becomes so when people,

through dialogue and interaction, recognise it as a biological, natural, characteristic. Natural twins could actively seek such recognition, making it an even stronger and defining aspect of their existence, or they could disavow it. Either way they would be actively engaged in the discursive construction of their own identities.

Gee proposed a distinction between 'discourse', which refers to language in use in specific sites or contexts, and 'Discourse', which refers to language "plus other stuff" (Gee, 1999, p. 7): actions, interactions, lifestyle choices, political and ideological orientations, and so on. Discourse (with a capital D) is never just a vector, or a medium, through which other "things" are carried during communication. The primary functions of Discourse are: "to scaffold the performances of social activities (whether play or work or both) and to scaffold human affiliation within cultures and social groups and institutions" (Gee, 1999, p. 1).

In other words, Discourse is always about identity; it is about being a certain kind of person in a certain cultural context (a group, an institution, a community), and it is about making visible and recognisable our way of being in the world through language, plus ways of acting, interacting, feeling, believing, dressing. People *actively* engage in what Gee calls *recognition work*, when "they try to make visible to others (and to themselves, as well) who they are and what they are doing." (Gee, 1999, p. 20).

Gee's discourse analysis is, by the author's admission, the result of "begging, borrowing and patching together" (1999, p. 5) different contributions from the wider discursive landscape. As he puts it:

"If there is any quality in my work, it is primarily in the "taste" with which I have raided others' stores and in the way I have adapted and mixed together the ingredients and, thereby, made the soup" (Gee, 1999, p. 5).

With reference to the four types of discourse analysis described earlier in this chapter, it could be argued that Gee's approach lies somewhere between the third and the fourth type, namely between the interest in the discursive strategies employed in specific cultural contexts, and the "wider" social focus of critical discourse analysis.

4.3.1 From practice to Discourse

According to Gee, languages have two grammars, the first is the conventional set of “rules” that regulate the articulation of units such as nouns, verbs, adjectives and so on. The second grammar goes beyond the dimension of spoken and written language and it is more concerned with situated and socially informed meanings. This grammar is based on the creation of patterns through which we can easily recognise “a specific social language and the concomitant social identities and activities” (Gee, 1999, p. 30). How do we manage to pick the “right” meaning of a sentence or an action among many possible “wrong” meanings, and to easily identify the actors and the identities implied? The reason, according to Gee, is that we participate, directly or indirectly, in countless social languages, and eventually this participation results in the creation of a varied and fluid background that helps us deal with our social realities.

Put in different words, it could be said that we participate in many interactive contexts: at school, in our professions, while doing sports and so on. This provides us with the ability to master, with varying degrees of competence, different “common” identities, more or less shared with other people involved in the same situations. Our progressive engagement with a social language leads to the ability to recognise and take part in the Discourses acting and interacting within that language. Every Discourse is about “pulling off” a certain type of socially situated identity, and creating a shared background of culturally informed meanings. At any particular moment a certain Discourse, and therefore a certain identity, will be more or less prevalent and “available” depending on the circumstances, thus explaining the constant shifting of our social identities even within an apparently defined and limited context.

Things could be made clearer with an example: let us imagine a young researcher who just joined a Physics department in a university. Wenger (1998, see also chapter 1 in this thesis) would see her professional development and socialisation process as a learning trajectory within a community of practice; a trajectory that goes from a peripheral to a more central participation, through progressive engagement in the typical academic social activities (teaching, researching, applying for funding, and so on.), and through the “mediating” role of the older members. Her identity as an academic, and as a member of that particular department, will gradually emerge from the everyday duties, from the tools, the symbols, the documents, the stories, the roles, and all the other mutually shared and embodied elements that, explicitly or tacitly, regulate meanings and relationships. Day after day she will become more familiar with that situated reality; her behaviour will be more confident, to a certain extent routinised and automatic, and situations and roles will be easier to recognise and to deal with. In other words, she will become more competent. As Wenger puts it:

“Membership in a community of practice translates into an identity as a form of competence. An identity in this sense is relating to the world as a particular mix of the familiar and the foreign, the transparent and the opaque (...). In practice, we know who we are by what is familiar, understandable, usable, negotiable; we know who we are not by what is foreign, opaque, unwieldy, unproductive” (Wenger, 1998, p. 153).

If this seems rather straightforward, it's because it is just half the story. If we looked at our “newcomer” from Gee’s perspective, we would realize that, day after day, she becomes more and more entangled in a *social language*, where different Discourses will be active at the same time, and where different ways to “pull off” an identity as an academic, and as a member of that specific department, will be available, depending on the circumstances. Such Discourses will have, like all other Discourses, at least three fundamental properties:

- They will be informed by history and culture, for example by the development of physics as a discipline, by the changes that have occurred in the field of professional, academic research in terms of values and expectations, by the antecedents of that particular university and/or department, by its own traditions and values, and so on.
- They will interact with each other in that specific interactive context (or community), and across other more or less neighbouring contexts. They will flow, connect, cross-reference, copy each other, and they will not be static but continuously renegotiated.
- They will not be, quoting Gee, “just statements and beliefs, but distinctive ways, in mind, body and social practice, to mark oneself in certain way” (Gee, 1999, p. 36). They will be part and parcel of the practices within that environment, of how things are done, and identities are created.

One of these Discourses could be very generally connected to the ethics and the status of being a researcher: what is accepted as normal behaviour, what is expected in terms of performance, what is “frowned upon” and can compromise a reputation or an entire career. Our young physicist could draw on this Discourse if, when interacting with her colleagues, she wants to be recognised as a “proper” researcher, aware of her status and responsibilities in the department.

A second Discourse could be related to the way the specific topic taught and researched in the department, physics, is constructed as an academic domain, rather than a “popular

science”, and she could draw on it if, interacting with friends and relatives, she wants to be recognised as a “legitimate scientist”.

A third Discourse could be much more specific and “local”, for example concerned with the relationship between departments of that particular university: collaboration, competition, relevance, feuds, and so on. She could use this Discourse while, for example, interacting with fellow academics from the engineering department, perhaps half-jokingly trying to affirm the superiority of her field, and her own identity, compared to those of an engineer.

Each Discourse would involve not just a different language, but also a different explanatory model, a different “theory” to make sense of its specific “area of pertinence”, a different set of activities, and so on. There would be overlapping aspects in many of them, while others would be in stark opposition. Our young academic might or might not be aware of the historical and cultural roots of such Discourses; what counts is that she is learning how to use them, often in an automatic, tacit way, in order to be recognised in a certain manner, depending on what the situation requires and what she wants to achieve.

It is clear that the scenario has become richer and what we have now is not a vague, yet stimulating theoretical framework, but some interpretive tools to study and, hopefully, understand what is actually going on. A potential analyst, interested in the dynamics of membership and participation, could focus on how young researchers in that particular department articulate their recognition work, seeing it as part of their learning experience. She could analyse how, depending on the circumstances, they actively create (or renegotiate) a common identity using language, symbols or getting engaged in specific practices and interactions. She could try to identify the connections that link a certain portion of text, either written or spoken, to the “larger picture”, i.e. to the process of construction and recognition of social identities.

In sum, a focus on social languages is the key to understanding how common identities are constructed and negotiated in, and across, interactive contexts. Gee’s discourse analysis can provide us with a terminology and a set of analytic tools (Discourses, recognition work, social languages) that can enrich the original CoP theorisation, and account for the inherent dynamism of people’s identities.

4.3.2 Gee's discourse analysis in further detail: situated meanings and cultural models

In this section I will describe in detail Gee's analytic approach to discourse, discussing what it involves and providing an example. The aim is to pave the way for the empirical section of the thesis. According to Gee, there are two types of meanings associated to words in every given situation, and in every social language: situated meanings and cultural models. The circular interaction between them brings Discourses, and therefore identities, to life.

Situated meanings

Situated meanings could be described as patterns of meaning grounded in specific contexts of interaction where people share common views, beliefs, expectations, languages, tools. The use of situated meanings is essential to frame every interaction according to what is "assumed" among speakers; in other words, they define the elements, the actors and the meanings that constitute the context, the situation, in every interaction. Gee identifies six factors that, at any time, actors "build" in every context to define the situated meanings:

- in the first place, and most importantly, they construct themselves as agents engaged in a specific set of activities;
- they define the activities taking place: what is actually being done in that situation;
- they construct the symbolic system that regulates communication in that specific situation (language, gestures, images, and so on);
- they define the "material" aspects of the situation: the place, the time, the bodies and the objects involved in that situation;
- they define the distribution of power and resources: what can be considered as capital and status in that situation;
- last but not least, they establish "connections" between that situation and others. Such connections will allow them to construct their identities across several interactions and contexts.

Gee emphasises that such situational factors are deeply intertwined and can be observed in isolation only through a systematic interpretive process, which ultimately depends on the specific research question that is being explored. The task is, again, to identify some sort of pattern in how some (or all) the factors are constructed in, and across, situations.

Cultural models, on the other hand, are defined by Gee as “story lines”, systems of “connected images”, and informal theories “rooted in the practices of the socio-cultural groups to which the learner belongs” (Gee, 1999, p. 43). Cultural models always carry important historical and, obviously, cultural dimensions, which account for the ways in which they are consistently articulated across several different situations and episodes: they represent the way society, history and culture are brought within specific, situated contexts. Situated meanings and cultural models are two facets of the same discursive process: cultural models inform situated meanings, and the construction of new situated meanings provides the means to change and “update” cultural models.

This brings us to what is probably the most important feature of Discourses: their *reflexivity* (see also Fairclough, 1992). Gee’s reflexivity has quite a different meaning from other ideas about reflexivity in qualitative research, where the term is used to imply the activity of self-questioning of the researcher/ethnographer, who is encouraged to explore the role of his/her own experience in influencing the dynamics she is observing and interpreting (see Willig, 2001). Gee uses “reflexivity” to signify the circular relationship between situated meanings and cultural models in terms of reflection/construction: they reflect each other and at the same time construct each other. Reflexivity is, in Gee’s framework, the lens through which people can be seen as actively engaged in shaping and changing their world, and their identities, rather than passively subject to the influence of abstract entities like “ideology” and “culture”.

Summarising, social languages are “made” of situated meanings and cultural models, which are two interdependent facets of the same process: the specific situation (what is going on, who are the actors, and so forth), and the cultural dimension that frames that particular situation in a given moment in history. Situated meanings and cultural models include language plus other aspects (actions, interactions, ways of thinking, dressing, believing, cultural values, historical assumptions and so on), and they interact together to create one or more Discourses. Discourses are always about identity, they are about “pulling off” a certain way of being in the world. People use Discourses (situated meanings and cultural models) to be recognised in a certain way. The task of the discourse analyst is to analyse Discourse, or Discourses, and the way they are employed by people in order to be recognised in a certain way (recognition work).

4.3.3 An Example of Gee's DA

The study reported here (Gee et al., 2001) was based on interviews with teenagers and their teachers from various middle schools and elite colleges in Massachusetts, and on ethnographic observations in actual school settings. In the first place, the teenagers and their teachers were divided in two groups according to their social background: working class (more ethnically diverse) or upper-middle class (mostly white). Gee described the differences between the groups in terms of distribution of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1977), where the well-off had been provided with more and better resources (languages, education, access to technology and other more or less explicit privileges). His objective was to use discourse analysis to explore the sociological view according to which these two groups are turning in two different cultures with little in common in terms of co-citizenship (Kanter, 1995; Kaplan, 1998; Reich, 1992): wealthier groups feel they have more in common with other elites across the globe, rather than with less affluent groups in their own country. To achieve his objective, he analysed how identities are constructed in two different situated contexts: at school and during the interaction between interviewer and interviewees.

Gee managed to identify a dominant type of recognition work enacted by working class students and an equally dominant type enacted by upper-middle class teens. Both types of recognitions were supported by specific cultural models: implicit theories used to make sense of direct and indirect experiences. The wealthier teens tended to frame their existences according to the typical values and assumptions of American middle class culture like, for example, the notion that individual effort and rationality are necessary to overcome negative emotions and occasional failings, or that life always offers a second chance to achieve a higher control over oneself and the context, and to be successful. Such a cultural model was an underlying element that influenced how activities, relationships, and power-related aspects were built in the upper-middle class social language and, therefore, how their identities were constructed.

Conversely, the working class teens based their recognition work on much more specific, local cultural models, often rooted in the ethnic groups they belonged to. The way they constructed themselves, their activities, their relationship with power and authority was less "normative" (how things should be in an abstract, general way), and more based on actual experiences (what their relatives, their peers and authority figures said and did). For example, analysing a narrative produced by one working-class Afro-American girl, Gee identified a very competent "story-telling" style that he interpreted as a typical feature of Afro-American youth culture. One of the cultural models underlying this style was that sympathetic, emotional and actual interactions are more important than "formal"

knowledge and values like those represented by school, which are expressions of “authority” and therefore cannot be trusted.

In sum, through this study Gee demonstrated that the two social groups of teen-agers, the ethnically diverse working class and the mostly white upper-middle class, were engaged in two different types of recognition work, each involving different discursive practices, interactions in different contexts, values and so on. One type was based on a depersonalised trajectory of achievement, and was approved and reinforced by norms and cultural expectations; the other was based on specific, sympathetic meaningful relations and interactions taking place outside the realm of “formal” authority and knowledge. Gee’s conclusion was that working class identities were more problematic because they were working against affiliation with schools, unless schools can learn how to understand them and adapt to them.

4.4 Alternative scenarios

So far, I have argued that Gee’s approach is the most appropriate method to investigate the discursive construction of a common identity. However, it is worth noting that alternative methodological scenarios could be envisaged; these scenarios need to be explored and discussed critically before delving into the empirical section.

An alternative way to understand whether a common identity is constructed in a networked environment could involve the measure of “identity markers”, like “I” pronouns, analysing how they are used in a specific context. Yates (2001) used this approach in a comparative analysis. His sample included face-to-face conversational data selected from large corpora (i.e., the British National Corpus), plus IRC (Internet Relay Chat) logs of synchronous discussions, and asynchronous posts selected from online forums and Usenet. With the aid of CAQDAS (Computer Assisted Qualitative Analysis) and KWIC (Key Words In Context) software he calculated the occurrence of identity markers within the overall data set, and analysed how such markers were actually used “in context” within a smaller sub-sample of cases. Doing so he could demonstrate that the level of self-awareness within CMC data was even higher than within face-to-face data, and that CMC identities were contextually constructed in terms of gender, social activities and interpersonal knowledge.

In a similar way, Job-Sluder and Barab (2004) analysed how maths and science teachers formed a common identity within an asynchronous virtual learning environment, the ILF (Inquiry Learning Forum), which was seen as online community of practice. They measured, like in the previous cases, the occurrence of personal pronouns within three

specific sections of the forum, each characterised by different topics of discussion; in addition, they carried out “semantic” analysis to investigate the contextual meanings of identity-related statements. They demonstrated that science and math teachers defined their identity by stating the specificity of their practice in relation to that of students: they were who they were because, compared to students, they *did* different things.

Both studies can be considered as examples of discourse analysis, although they favoured a more quantitative approach, based on “coding and counting” specific, relatively discreet instances. Such a methodological decision is absolutely legitimate, and it has obvious advantages in terms of representativeness. However, other relevant aspects are inevitably lost. In the first place, none of the afore-mentioned studies tells us much about the relationship between identities and “complex” dynamics of membership in, and across, contexts. Even more importantly, providing basic evidence that a common identity is constructed is important, but we need to know also *what* kind of identity is constructed, and *why* it is constructed in a certain way.

A more “ethnographic”, and more critical, approach could prove a more useful means of understanding the unique discursive construction taking place in a specific situation, like a discussion within an online forum of teachers, and its relationship with the wider social context. More specifically, through Gee’s DA we would we would probably be able to achieve four objectives:

- i. we would be able to identify the social languages through which teachers construct a common identity in the online context; linking them to the Discourses that underlie different aspects of teachers’ identities in different contexts like, for instance, during actual teaching activities.
- ii. We could interpret the way teachers build common identities as an active effort to be appropriately recognised depending on the situation.
- iii. We could try to identify whether there is a type of “recognition” more stable than others, that re-occurs to a certain extent across different contexts, through language, actions, interactions and so on. We could see the ability to articulate such recognition as a fundamental part of the process through which teachers *learn* to be teachers.
- iv. Furthermore, we would be able to see the political side of such construction/recognition, the underlying dynamics of power that determine who is “in” and who is “out” of a certain group or sub-group of teachers, and how such dynamics change when the situation and the interlocutors change.

Summary

In this chapter I have introduced discourse analysis, discussing its suitability to the specific research question being explored in the thesis (Is the construction of a common identity taking place?). The chapter's main point was that discourse analysis is the only method that allows language and practice to be considered as two interrelated dimensions, two parts of a symbolic process through which identities are constructed and negotiated across, and not just within, contexts. One approach in particular (Gee's ethnographic discourse analysis) emerged as the most appropriate, due to its emphasis on the educational implications of identity and discourse. This chapter was based on a general methodological discussion which will continue throughout the thesis at different levels of specificity. The empirical section will provide more detailed information about the analytic procedure and coding in particular, highlighting some of the issues (e.g., triangulation) which will be object of a critical discussion in the thesis' conclusions.

During the course of next chapters I will apply Gee's discourse analysis to CMC data in order to identify the underlying recognition work of a group of students and professionals. To answer my research question I will analyse the situated meanings and the cultural models which support the Discourse enacted within a specific online environment, focusing specifically on how such meanings and models are actively used to achieve a certain kind of "recognition". Furthermore, I will explore the role of CMC in the process of identity construction.

5. The empirical study: young psychologists online

The first part of the thesis introduced the research field, the theoretical background, the rationale and the main research question. Furthermore, an appropriate methodology was identified and discussed. The second part will describe and discuss the empirical work which has been carried out. To explore the research question I have analysed a discussion room within an online forum of psychology students and young professionals. In this chapter I will report the main study which investigated whether, and how, participants in the discussion room constructed a common identity through asynchronous computer-mediated communication. Using Gee's discourse analysis, I will suggest that the interplay between situated meanings and cultural models underlies a specific type of collaborative recognition work in the discussion room, which results in the definition of a common identity as "young psychologists".

5.1 *The Context*

The study was carried out in an Italian forum of psychology students and professionals: OPSonline (Obiettivo Psicologia online). OPSonline defines itself "an independent web community of psychology students and professionals" (fig. 5.1). The web site went online in May 2001 out of the initiative of a group of psychology graduates from the university of Rome "La Sapienza" to deal with a supposed lack of opportunities and networks in the Italian academic and professional contexts. According to the project's value statement OPSonline is:

A meeting place where students, graduates, professionals and general users can establish valuable relations, sharing experiences, information and practices, helping each other in developing as a group and as professionals. (2001, Copyright by OPSonline s.r.l.).

The number of registered members is, at the time of writing, more than 10.000. Registration is free, and involves providing basic personal information. Members of the

“community” interact in an asynchronous forum and a chat-room, and have access to a mutually built knowledge base of articles, academic theses and lecture notes. The forum is organised around a number of “discussion rooms” (fig. 5.2), which reflect the composition of the community and the different academic and professional contexts of provenience. They are:

- 12 rooms about themes of professional development (among them the one object of analysis in this study);
- 18 “faculty” rooms (“local” rooms developed spontaneously within the major Italian universities);
- 4 thematic rooms (psychotherapies, clinical psychology, occupational psychology, psychology and internet);
- Four “relationship” rooms (more relaxed and informal).

The original group of founders are still the administrators of the community, and they are supported by approximately 40 moderators, recruited among the members on a voluntary basis.



Fig. 5.1 OPSONline's home page, with the links to the different sections and, in orange, to the forum

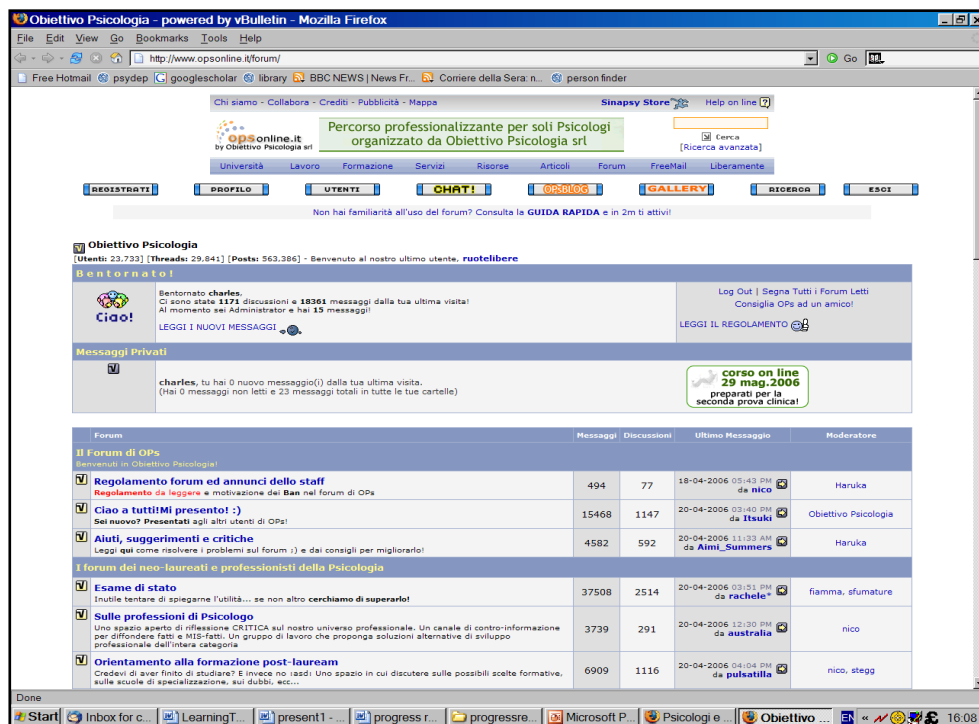


Fig. 5.2 The forum's main page, with the links to different discussion rooms, including to the one object of analysis ("sulle professioni di psicologo": on the psychological professions).

During its earlier stages OPOnline was a small phenomenon limited to the University of Rome. Its popularity spread rapidly as the result of word of mouth extending also to other psychology courses across Italy, and "local" discussion rooms were created to meet specific needs and deal with particular issues.

5.1.1 Accessing the context and gaining consent

Following a period of preliminary, exploratory observations (what is generally called "lurking": reading posts in an online forum without actively contributing), in January 2005 a more systematic approach was adopted. The research was introduced approximately a month later (28-02-2005) to the whole community through a post stating the objectives and the scope of the study (fig. 5.3), the post linked directly to a page where the whole research proposal was available for consultation.



Fig. 5.3 The first, introductory post.

The following is a translation of this introductory post:

Hello everybody, last week a research proposal was presented on the OPSOnline's homepage, the proposal's title is: "OPSONline: knowledge production between discourse and practice" (the link is....). After the "official" introduction I thought it would be a good idea to introduce myself to the whole community in a more informal way, therefore here I am! My name is Carlo, I am a first year PhD student at the University of Bath in England, and I am a psychologist, like probably a lot of people around here. I got in contact with OPSOnline a while ago because I happen to know the administrators, and I have collaborated with them for a brief period. From the beginning I was convinced that OPSOnline deserved more attention and, little by little, I put together a research proposal that after a while ended up in the department of psychology at the afore-mentioned university.


Summing up, the research's main objectives are:

- To analyse the problematic aspects of the Community of Practice's concept and, in more general terms, of the situated learning paradigm when it is applied to the study of virtual communities.
- To analyse the meanings negotiated and constructed within OPSOnline: what is going on in the community? Is it possible to identify patterns of interactions to interpret OPSOnline in terms of "knowledge production"?

- To study the nature of the participation in OPSonline: how is participation interpreted and enacted by members of the community?

The methodology I have in mind is essentially qualitative, and it is based on the discursive analysis of interactions and interviews. I hope I'll be able to count on your collaboration. I'll try to keep you posted on the developments.

Thanks to all!

Carlo: 

The replies from various posters were welcoming and the administrators granted me privileges to access the administration panel and carry out some basic search operations on the subscribed members of the forum. The challenge at this stage was to identify, within the community, the appropriate section to study the construction of a common identity. This meant ruling out, for instance, the sections dedicated to basic information exchange about university lectures, those dedicated to informal chat and so on, in order to concentrate on the more reflective areas, where members tended to engage in longer discussions about professional practices and career trajectories.

This decision was mainly informed by the concept of theoretical, or purposeful, sampling developed in the context of Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Theoretical sampling is a data-driven and ethnographic approach whose purpose is to “go to places, people, or events that will maximise opportunities to discover variations among concepts and to densify categories in terms of their properties and dimensions” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 201). As a result, the focus was redirected to one specific discussion room within the forum, aptly called “On the psychological professions”, which seemed particularly suited to the aims of the research. The discussion room was set up in November 2004 as a space to *reflect* collaboratively on problematic dimensions related to the condition of the psychological profession in Italy. The room was officially described as:

An open space for a CRITICAL (*capitals in the original - Ed*) reflection on our professional universe... (a space) where we can work out alternative solutions for our professional development.

The majority of the discussions within this room were, and still are, about more or less problematic issues related to the psychological profession. They can be organised in two broad categories:

1. Explicit requests for help/information regarding alternative practices that could be used by psychologists (homeopathy, hypnotherapy, pet-therapy, etc.) or bureaucratic and tax-related issues for those who are just accessing the profession.

2. Open ended discussions which explicitly focus on critical aspects of the profession, such as how to promote an accurate and non-superficial image of psychology in the media, or about general expectations and professional ambitions (with titles like “the occupational future of psychologists”, or “how to take care of our profession”).

At the beginning of the data collection (April 2005) the room had a total number of 186 subscribed participants and 65 casual “visitors”. The subscribed participants can be considered as regular members, although overall participation in an online, networked context is fluid and difficult to pin down. Within this room, 20 out of 275 discussions were randomly selected for analysis. The discussions occurred from November 2004 to April 2005, table 5.1 provides descriptive information about the discussions (word count and average posting).

Total number of discussions.	20
Total posts	239
Average posts per discussion	11.5
Average posts per person	2.32
Total words	37543

Table 5.1 Descriptive summary of the threads.

103 posters took part in the discussions, 62 of them identified as women, 27 identified as men. In 14 cases the information about gender was deliberately omitted (this, and the following, information was provided in the profiles of each member, which are public and do not require authorisation from the data owner to be viewed). The majority of the posters, 43, identified as graduates, 36 as professionals, 16 as undergraduate students and the remaining 8 as generic users. The prevalence of women among posters reflects a typical characteristic of the psychological profession’s demographics in Italy. According to official data from the Italian Professional Body of Psychologists (www.psy.it), nearly 80% of psychology graduates are women.

5.2 Coding

5.2.1 The emergence of the analytical categories

To contextualise further some of the steps undertaken in the empirical study, I will provide in this section a summary of the analytical process based on Gee's discourse analysis (see also chapter 4). According to Gee, there are two types of meanings associated with semiotic interactions in every given situation: situated meanings and cultural models. The relationship between them situates identity in a specific context of agency, as well as in a cultural and historical one. Situated meanings could be described as patterns of meaning grounded in specific contexts of interaction where people share common views, beliefs, expectations, languages, tools. The use of situated meanings is essential to frame every mediated action according to what is "assumed" among speakers; in other words, they define the elements, the actors and the meanings that constitute the "situation" in every interaction.

Cultural models, on the other hand, are defined by Gee as "story lines", systems of "connected images", and informal theories "rooted in the practices of the socio-cultural groups to which the learner belongs" (Gee, 1999, p. 43). Cultural models always carry important historical and, obviously, cultural dimensions, which account for the ways in which they are consistently articulated across several different situations and episodes: they represent the way society, history and culture are brought within specific, situated contexts. Situated meanings and cultural models are two facets of the same discursive process: cultural models inform situated meanings, and the construction of new situated meanings provides the means to change and "update" cultural models.

Within this framework the analytical process focuses on discourse, and sees the culturally mediated, goal-oriented actions constructed and conveyed through discourse as the units of analysis. These actions can be observed, analysed and interpreted as discursive instances drawing on a combination of situated meanings and cultural models. It is important at this point to reiterate that situated meanings and cultural models are two interdependent facets of the same process: the specific situation, observable by looking with an "ethnographer's eye" at what is going on, who are the actors, and so forth; and the cultural dimension that frames that particular situation in a given moment in history, also observable through ethnographic engagement with the data. Situated meanings and cultural models interact together to create one or more specific socially constructed identities. The "goal" of such identities is to "pull off" a certain way of being in the world, and to be recognised in a specific, distinctive manner.

For illustrative purposes this section will describe, step-by-step, the analytical process that led to the identification of the initial “open” categories, and how these were further coded to allow the emergence of the analytical scheme. Furthermore, the section will describe the more detailed analytical work carried out to identify the two sets of situated meanings (Peripheral Participation and Reflection) and the three cultural models (Psychologists under Threat, Psychologists and Health and Disempowered Psychologists) within the data. All the main categories will be further discussed and interpreted later in this chapter and their implications for the research question will be explored.

5.2.2 Step 1 - Data preparation

The first step of the process that led to the analytical categories was the creation of text documents that could be easily read and coded. The 20 online discussions were saved as “.txt” files and uploaded to a personal computer in order to be analysed through the software for qualitative analysis Nvivo (see fig 5.4).

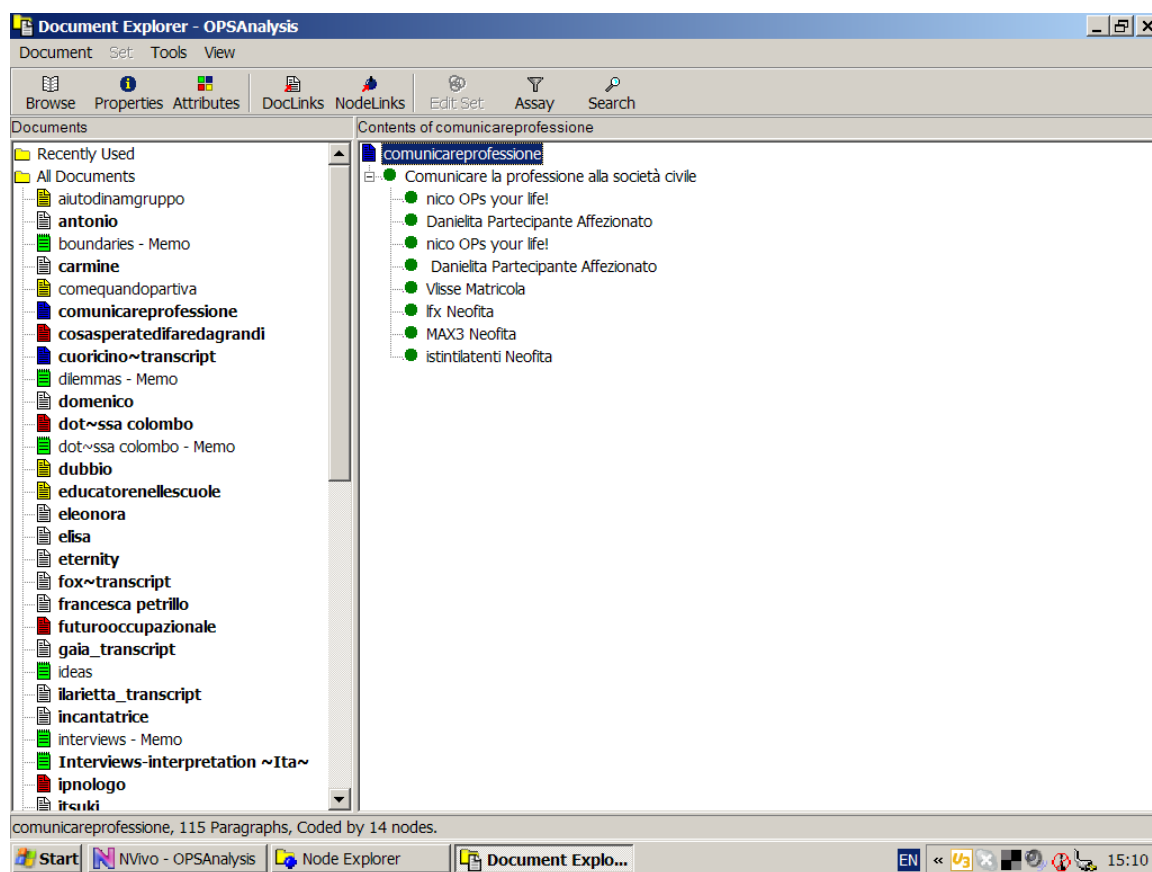


Fig. 5.4 The data in Nvivo. The documents uploaded to Nvivo can be seen at the left-hand side of the screen; each document can be viewed and accessed for coding. Note, at the right-hand side of the screen, one of the online discussions with the total number of posts and the names of each

poster.

5.2.3 Step 2 - Open coding

Once the data had been uploaded in Nvivo, all the online discussions were read several times looking for emerging “free” patterns. This process is called open coding. In Nvivo, open coding is achieved by placing at the node not segments of data but references to the data about that topic. Open coding (or “free” coding as it is called in Nvivo) is carried out whilst first reading a document, identifying topics and categories of significance to the research question. Using this approach, the documents were read several times to identify initial themes, which emerged straight up from the data without any reference to a specific theoretical model (see figures 5.5 and 5.6).

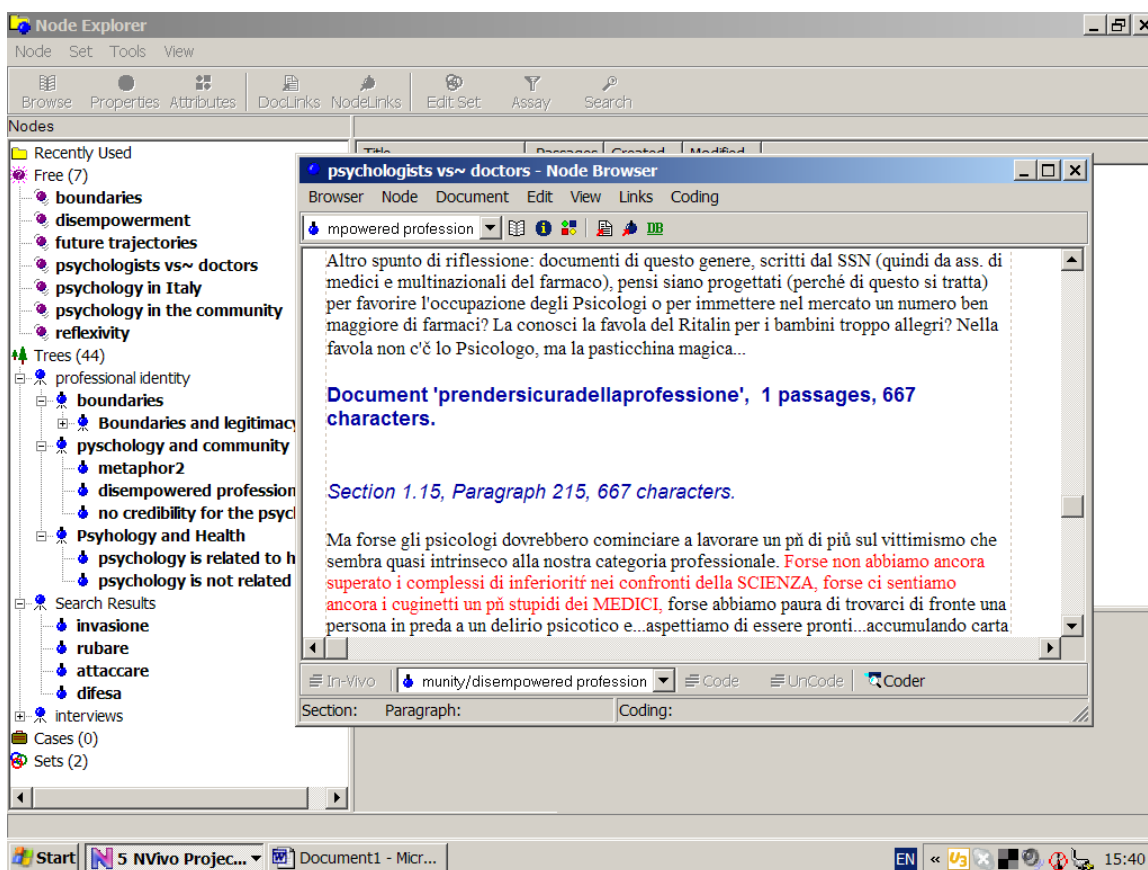


Fig. 5.5 Screenshot of the Node Explorer in Nvivo. The initial free nodes can be seen at the left-hand side of the screen. They can be accessed by clicking on them and open coding can be carried out at the document level as showed at the right-hand side of the screen.

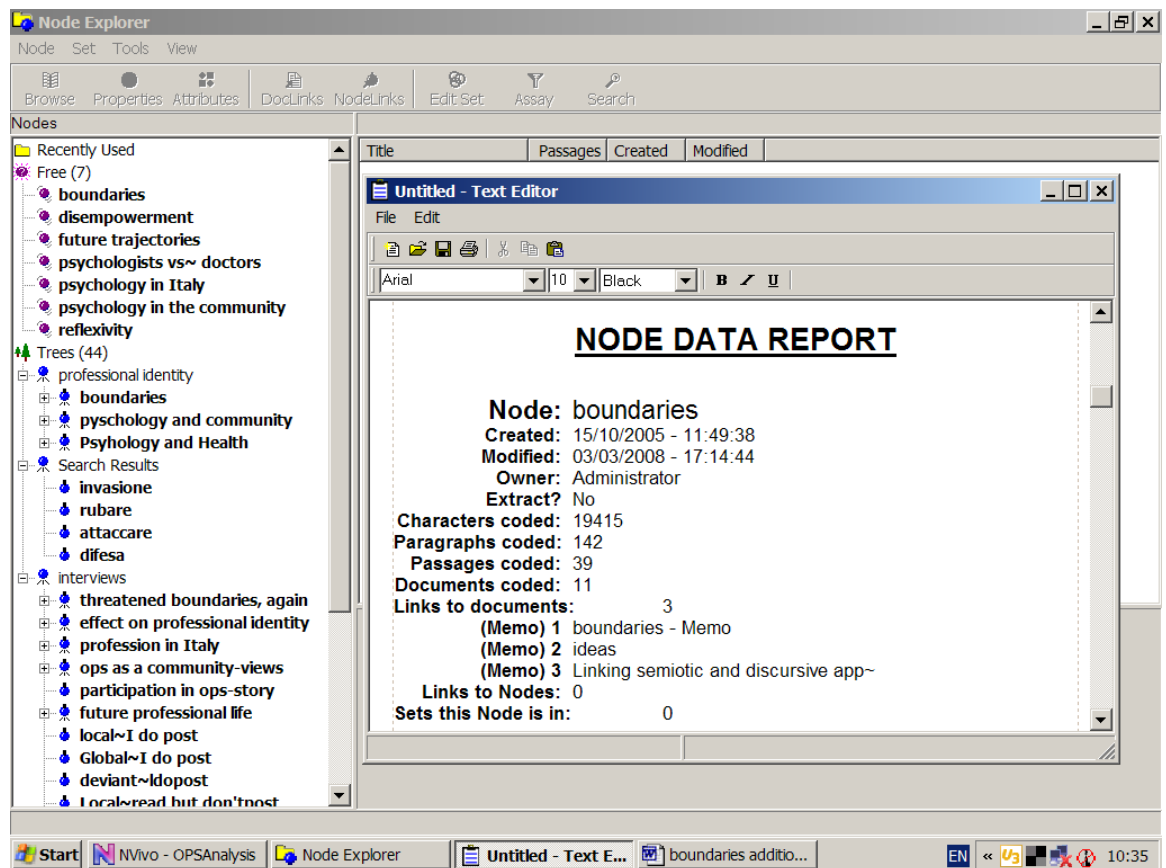


Fig. 5.6 Another screenshot of the node-explorer in Nvivo. This time showing the data report for one the main free nodes: boundaries. Note the information available about total characters coded (19415), how many documents contributed to the node (11), and the memos attached to the node. Similar information for all the other free nodes is reported in the table below.

The initial phase of open coding allowed the emergence of 7 categories: boundaries, disempowerment, future trajectories, psychologists vs doctors, psychology in Italy, psychology in the community and support for reflection. The following table (Tab 5.2) reports basic descriptive data for all the free nodes emerged after the initial phase of open coding. The 7 preliminary categories will be described in further detail in the next paragraph.

	The total number of examples coded for each category.	The number of online discussions in which the free node was coded.
Boundaries	39	11
Psychologists vs doctors	18	6
Psychology in Italy	13	9
Psychology in the community	17	10
Disempowerment	44	8
Future trajectories	14	7
Support for Reflection	26	13

Table 5.2 Data reports for all the free nodes.

The initial data-driven categories

The preliminary phase of open coding, described in the previous paragraph, led to the identification of 7 categories (free nodes in Nvivo). Brief examples are used to illustrate the categories.

1. *Support for Reflection*

These were explicit, direct invitations to engage in a reflective and constructive discourse about the conditions of the profession. The two examples below show how such invitations were usually articulated. Usually, they would start with a reference to a general topic or issue related to the state of the profession, and continue with an explicit encouragement to share experiences and opinions. These posts had obviously a high likelihood to spark particularly “reflective” discussions in which professional identity was a key aspect.

Examples:

Nico (male, moderator) Well, I would like to ask your opinion about our capacity to communicate to the civil society. How much can this affect our professional opportunities?

Daistica (male, graduate) I notice that some of you, of us actually, are beginning to take more seriously a topic that should be of the utmost importance for all of us (...) I'd be glad if also those who have left university a while ago started to share their experiences.

2. Future Trajectories

The passages coded in this category were explicit or implicit explorations of possible career paths. The following examples show how these were usually articulated: participants would usually make a personal reference to a possible professional trajectory (becoming a psychotherapist, or an educational psychologist) accompanied by an invitation for further information or advice. See following examples.

Romagnoli (male, student) It may be too much for me but I would love to become a psychotherapist and, at the same time, work as a training consultant for companies. Then, at a later stage, when I am bit older, I might even consider the academic career... why not ;-))

Watson76 (male, student) Hello guys, does anybody work as educational psychologist in a school? (...) I have been told that I could apply to certain schools offering counselling services (...). However I have also been told that I couldn't apply as independent professional, I am not sure, does anybody know anything?

3. Psychology in Italy

The passages coded in this node were those in which participants made specific references to the state of the profession in Italy, usually drawing attention to the lack of protection caused by an inappropriate legislation and by the complacency of the professional body which, according to participants, does not speak for the young struggling psychologists, see examples below.

Nico (male, moderator) In my opinion, we tend to be overprotective because often we don't have anything else to do or say. This happens because (*in our profession - Ed*) there is a shortage of people with management skills. The truth is that our professional body is controlled by psychologists who are not managers. Perhaps they are very good psychologists, but this doesn't mean they know how to manage and promote a community of professionals.

Almaserena (female, graduate) I wish the professional body could show more interest. Starting from clearer relationships among professionals, from the needs of new and old members, from the desire of being known and recognised within a society that mistreats us.

4. Boundaries

The passages coded in this node were those in which participants explicitly or implicitly explored the “threat” originating from other unqualified professionals like homeopathy therapists, dentist hypnotists, training consultants and other practitioners living and “loitering” at the boundaries of “legitimate” psychology. The examples below show how these comments were articulated, usually making explicit references to the lack of official, legitimate qualifications of such individuals.

Examples:

HT Sirri (male, moderator) (...) Does anyone want to be a therapist? Fair enough, I am happy about it, provided they have a certain type of profile, which must include also a degree in psychology.

Kia (female, graduate) Honestly I have no idea how you can become a qualified hypnotist. The only thing I know is that my dentist is also a hypnotist. Yes that's right! He attended some course in Turin for some months and he became hypnotist (...) I am rather puzzled and veeeery disappointed (...).

5. Psychology in the Community

The passages coded in this node were those in which participants explicitly or implicitly explored the role of psychologists in the civil society, often highlighting their lack of recognition and stereotypes undermining their public image, see examples below.

MAX3 (male, graduate) One generation will not be enough to change our culture, but if we look back some important steps have been made: until not long ago people were ashamed of being in need of a psychologist (...). Nowadays things have changed, and although some are ashamed, society is becoming more aware that psychology is not just for the “mentally ill”, but it could be useful to anyone (football players, prison inmates, children, adolescents and so on).

Nico (male, moderator) In a society that cannot offer to all psychology graduates a future (...) we should start exploring new routes.

6. Disempowerment

The passages coded in this node were those in which participants expressed a sense of frustration and anger, sometimes plain hopelessness, at the state of the profession. The examples below show how such feelings were usually articulated, usually by reiterating

the disappointment caused by “broken promises” of professional fulfilment.

Examples:

Eowin (female, graduate) Do you think I can pass the admission exam to the faculty of medicine? I want to redeem myself; I want to make atonement for being so naïve to fall in such a stupid mousetrap like the psychology course. A course with only one aim: to keep lecturers and professors well-fed. It's outrageous, outrageous!

Almaserena (female, graduate) Do you find it normal that we are forced to accumulate qualifications and postgraduate training, when the only criterion that is always used in recruitment is actual on-the-job experience? Some of them want “at least seven years experience”! Seven years of troubles I say! That's the only thing we are going to get if things don't change.

7. Psychologists vs. Doctors

The passages coded in this node were those in which participants complained about the arrogance of doctors and psychiatrists in the clinical sector, lamenting their lack of collaboration and their reluctance to recognise psychologists as peers and legitimate “professionals of the mind”. See the following examples.

Danielita (female, student) (...) this is my experience: doctors tend to take our place, they don't value our opinion during a diagnosis. Furthermore, they can even become psychotherapists, and this makes them feel even more powerful.

LatentImpulses (female, graduate) (...) For most people popping a pill is much simpler than putting an entire life in discussion. Furthermore it's very easy to believe that the cause of our troubles is in our bodies, and doctors do all they can to support the idea that our “break-downs” can be fixed like in a machine.

5.2.4 Step 3 - Further coding and population of the main categories

The identification of the 7 categories described in the previous section was based on immersion in the data and on the open coding of recurrent, relevant themes and patterns. This was the initial, data driven phase on the analytical work. Subsequently, Gee's framework was applied to the seven categories in order to carry out further interpretive coding through increased organisation and focus. This was the theory driven phase of the analytical work. During this process, Gee's notions of situated meanings and cultural

models provided a general framework which informed the analysis. This allowed me to apply a theoretical lens to the phenomena observed in the discussion room, which had been initially aggregated and coded on the basis on patterns of meaning and discourse exhibited in the text.

As a result, the nodes were merged, linked, split and re-interpreted to answer two specific sub-questions which were: what are the situated meanings and the cultural models at play? What kind of recognition work is being enacted? This led to the identification of 2 sets of situated meanings: *Peripheral Participation* and *Reflection*, and three cultural models: *Psychologists under Threat*, *Psychologists and Health* and *Psychologists Disempowered*. The following table (5.3) reports descriptive information for the main analytical categories, after the phase of further coding.

	The total number of passages coded for each category.	The number of online discussions in which the free node was coded.
Reflection	26	13
Peripheral participation	21	15
Psychologists under threat	29	7
Psychologists and Health	33	10
Disempowered psychologists	31	8

Table 5.3 Data reports for the 5 main analytical categories.

The following sections will describe the process of further coding for both sets of situated meanings and for the three cultural models. This will pave to the way for the second part of the chapter (5.3), in which the data will be object of a more in-depth interpretive analysis based on the notions of situated meanings, cultural models and recognition work.

Peripheral Participation

This section describes the analytical process that led to the discursive category *Peripheral Participation*. This category emerged from further interpretive coding of two of the seven free nodes reported in paragraph 5.2.3 . These were:

- *Future Trajectories*: explicit or implicit explorations of possible career paths.
- *Psychology in Italy*: Lack of protection through an appropriate legislation, complacency of the professional body which does not speak for the young struggling psychologists.

Consider now the following discursive instances (i.e. units of analysis), which were free coded in the *Future Trajectories* node. The instances come from a discussion about additional training and qualifications (training credits) provided by some post-graduate courses. In the discussion, most of the posts were concerned with the uncertainty surrounding future career paths for psychologists.

Psicosimpat (female, graduate) The worst thing is that universities often offer courses which do not give any guarantee of future employment. It is just another form of exploitation of young professionals, this state of affairs should make us think!

Stefano (male, professional) The real issue with such courses is that qualifications and accreditation will never be as important as actual experience. Masters and training credits might be a good idea in terms of continuous professional development, but they rarely create the right conditions to access a career. It's up to us to create those conditions.

Now consider the following instance, which comes from the same discussion but was originally coded in the free node *Psychology in Italy*. The instance is still clearly concerned with training and future trajectories, but this time in relation to the general state of the profession:

Vimae (Male, graduate) In this country people who are not even psychologists get access to post-graduate courses in psychology, there is no clear selection and everyone can get the same (training) credits (...) it is some kind of vicious circle, a total lack of transparency that allows institutions to remain in the dark. As a result we, the young psychologists who face a very uncertain future, are left frustrated. What can we do to get what we are simply entitled to have: transparency, promotion, protection?

After several sessions of reading and coding sessions through Nvivo, it became clear to me that the exploration of future career and training paths, and the criticism directed at the condition of psychology in Italy were serving the same purpose: they were laying out the meanings negotiated by the members of the discussion room in relation to themselves and their experiences. They were creating an “affinity space” in which participants shared a set of assumptions about who they were and what they were doing: a group of “peripheral” young psychologists engaged in a struggle to gain access to the professional community, and dealing with a system of privileges and injustices hard to shake.

According to Gee (1999) when a word is associated with a verbal definition, we say it has a verbal meaning, when it is associated with an image, action, goal, experience, or dialogue, we say it has a situated meaning. Situated meanings can be observed as discursive instances used by people to relate to each other primarily in terms of common interests, endeavours, goals, or practices, thus creating an “affinity space” (Gee, 2005), a specific situation in which people share a common understanding on who they are and what is going on, that is, how the images, actions, experiences, or dialogue they employ tie to a clear self-construction, function, goal, and accomplishment.

Reflection

This section describes further the rationale behind the population of the discursive category *Reflection*. During the coding process, reflection was the only free node which remained substantially unchanged during the process of further coding. In fact, this category emerged from simple refinement of one of the seven free nodes reported in paragraph 5.2.3: *Support for Reflection*, that is, explicit and direct invitations to engage in a reflective and constructive discourse about the conditions of the profession. In a way which was consistent with the notion of affinity space (Gee, 2005) mentioned above, the theme of reflection gradually emerged as an important situated assumption within the discussion room: a shared set of beliefs about the nature of participants’ interactions in a particular situation, what they were doing in the discussion room: “reflecting” together on the issues and the challenges of their “peripheral participation”. The following examples show more instances which were included in this category.

Clea (female, graduate) Hi all, reading this thread made me think of the first months of last year, when I was full of doubts and I felt like I was wandering in the dark. But now I feel much better I would like to reassure you: once you make the jump everything begins to flow! Well, you do need

to jump in the water at some point if you want to learn to swim (...) and now I would like to share what my experience taught me (...)

Stefano (male, professional) what if instead of always pointing out what we cannot do and achieve, we started talking about the things we could do? Let's be positive (...) I think we are in serious need to share views on this stuff (...) I have a degree in psychology, I am interested in politics etc. but I don't know anything at all about the politics of our own profession!! Don't you think we should all talk more about this? If we help each other we can make some sense of this mess!!

In both cases there are explicit references to personal experiences and views, and in both cases these are resources which are drawn upon to encourage a reflective dialogue among people who clearly see themselves as part of a group, sharing and negotiating the discursive elements that define their "affinity" in the discussion room.

Psychologist under threat and Psychologists and health

This section describes the analytical process that led to two cultural models:

Psychologists under Threat and *Psychologists and Health*. These are considered in the same section as they are very much related to each other, although some key distinctive aspects will be pointed out. These categories emerged from further interpretive coding of two of the seven free nodes reported in paragraph 5.2.3. These were:

- *Boundaries*: perceived threat from other unqualified professionals like homeopathy therapists, "dentist & hypnotists", training consultants.
- *Psychologists vs. Doctors*: arrogance of doctors and psychiatrists in the clinical sector, lack of collaboration and recognition.

Consider the following discursive instances (i.e, units of analysis), which were free-coded in the *Boundaries* node. In both cases, a participant in the forum draws a clear line between psychology and other "neighbouring" professional practices (hypnotherapy, counselling, etc.), in the first case, by explicitly using the word "charlatan", in the second case by emphasising the need to protect and recognise the degree in psychology as "the only qualification that gives you the right competences".

FRK (Female, student) Unfortunately, the hypnotherapy field in our country is still very messy! It was my dissertation topic and I realised straight away what the situation is really like (...) if people

wish to be treated through hypnosis they should only trust qualified professionals who draw on Erickson's theory. Everyone else is likely to be a charlatan.

Eowin (Female graduate) I am not frightened by the underworld of counsellors, psycho-pedagogists etc. who invade our field, as long as the degree in psychology is protected and recognised as the only qualification that gives you the right competences.

Now consider the following instance, which was free-coded in *Psychologists vs. Doctors*, note how the relationship between psychology and medicine comes to symbolise the relationship between psychology and science, with problematic expressions such as "inferiority complex" and "sense of inadequacy" having a somewhat prominent role in the text.

Karmen (female, professional) Perhaps we have not yet overcome the inferiority complex towards science, perhaps next to doctors we still feel like the younger and less clever brothers (...) we are terrified by the idea of having to deal with real mental illness. We keep training and studying but we're motivated only by our own sense of inadequacy.

From the early phases of the analytical work, it appeared clear that the relationship with doctors was discursively constructed in terms of distinction; therefore it could be argued that it should have been part of *Boundaries*. In fact, a few instances were coded in both open nodes as it was felt they had areas of overlap. However, it soon became clear that the cultural resources employed when dealing with doctors were significantly more complex and ambivalent. While "other professionals" were identified only as potential threats, alien to the actual legitimate professional practices; doctors (and psychiatrists in particular) were at the centre of a more subtle discursive dynamic revolving around the notions of "science" and in particular "health". This dynamic was more concerned with the perceived "scientific inferiority" of psychology, rather than with straightforward, legitimate/non legitimate distinctions, and it was articulated as a set of views and statements part of an implicit theory, a cultural model (Gee, 1999) exemplifying the relationships and the values operating in a socio-cultural context.

This crucial aspect of the data emerged gradually from the analysis through repeated coding and reading. The process of deep engagement with the data was once more facilitated by the software tool Nvivo, which allowed the articulation of many "memos" and interpretive notes, easily attached to the free nodes to support the analysis (see fig. 5.7).

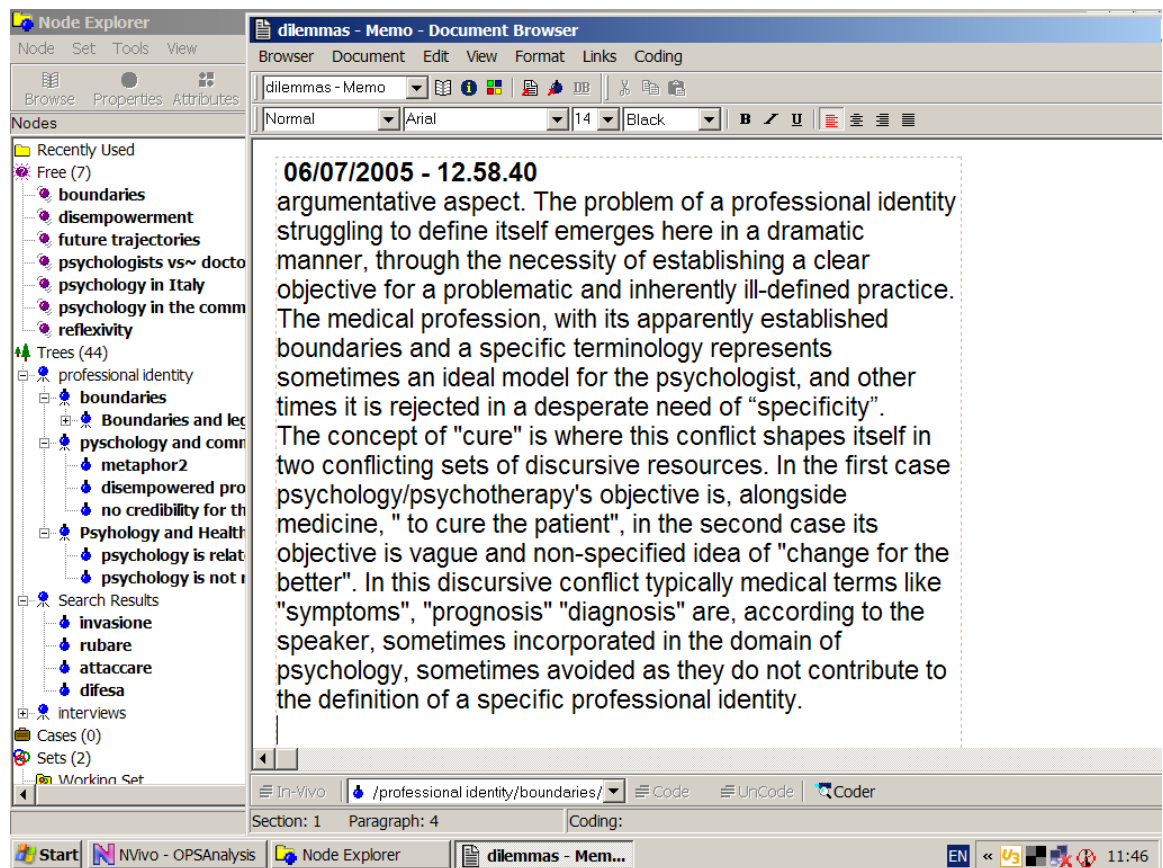


Fig. 5.7 one of the memos created during further coding and attached to the node, reflecting an important moment of the analytical/interpretive process.

As a result, *Boundaries* was renamed and recoded as *Psychologists under Threat*. This new category was specifically linked to the threat posed by “invading” professional practices, while the few instances which were concerned with the medical profession, were re-coded alongside the whole *Psychology vs. Doctors* category in a new category: *Psychology and Health*. It is important to reiterate that the rationale behind such decisions was first and foremost based on interpretation and immersion in the data.

Disempowered Psychologists

This section describes the analytical process that led to the last cultural model: *Disempowered Psychologists*. These categories emerged from further interpretive coding of two of the seven free nodes reported in paragraph 5.2.3. These were:

- *Psychology in the Community*: passages in which participants explicitly or implicitly explored the role of psychologists in the civil society, highlighting the damaging effect of negative stereotypes.

- *Disempowerment*: passages in which participants expressed a sense of frustration and anger at the state of the profession.

The same analytical approach described in the previous section was applied to these free nodes, which were “merged” resulting in *Disempowered Psychologists*. Consider the following example, which was initially free-coded in *Psychology in the Community*:

Valeriob (male, professional) unfortunately the health system, the education sector and the private sector are all off limits for us, due to cultural trends (the success of the drugs), demographic reduction and other factors. Demand is shrinking while our offer keeps increasing! I really don't know what else we could do (...), I feel it's time we enter any job market, no matter which one, before it's really too late.

Now consider the following example, which was initially free-coded in *Disempowerment*:

Ssuzzi (female, graduate) In Italy there is a real prejudice against psychologists, they see us as “shrinks” or wacky caretakers for mad people. Do you want to know the most depressing thing? Even my old professor of Organisational Psychology kept telling me and the other students to avoid advertising too much that we were psychologists while applying for jobs. He told us to emphasise instead that we are “experts in human resource management”. This is bigotry and shameless prejudice, and as a result every other graduate has an advantage over us in the job market!

As the two examples above illustrate, the node *Psychology in the Community* was concerned with the role of psychology in the wider social context. *Disempowerment*, on the other hand, was concerned with the feelings of powerlessness and frustration expressed by participants in relation to an uncertain professional future. However, such feelings were not happening in a social vacuum, but were immersed in the same social context which was so passionately criticised for its inadequacy, and often revolved around the lack of recognition of psychologists and their poor representation in the popular media. During the phase of further coding, it became clear that both themes were drawing on the

same stock of cultural resources. *Disempowerment* and *Psychology in the Community* were, in other words, two different articulations of the same *cultural model*: an implicit theory which constructed the relationship between psychology and society in terms of power, particularly in terms of institutional recognition, authoritativeness and active participation in productive contexts. This cultural model will be further discussed, alongside the other main categories, in the following section, which will focus more on the interpretive work carried out on the data and its relevance to the research question.

5.3 Interpretation

5.3.1 The situated meanings

Those engaged in such a dialogue constructed themselves as a relatively specific group within OPSonline: the “peripherals”, that is, young psychologists or psychology students who implicitly saw themselves as “peripheral participants” (Lave & Wenger, 1991) in relation to the “official” psychological practices.

The implications of peripheral participation in this context were slightly more problematic than in the linear, periphery-to-the-centre, trajectories described by Lave and Wenger. In his subsequent work, Wenger (1998) acknowledged that trajectories of participation are not always “legitimate”, and do not always follow the optimal pattern of a newcomer moving towards central participation; this appeared to be particularly true in this case. In fact, members of this group represented their professional experiences as negligible or irrelevant, often struggling to see themselves as future psychologists. Following are some examples, extracts from two discussions included in the sample, which illustrate this aspect. Note that although all discussions’ extracts are reported faithfully, some of the posts “in between” are omitted. This was an inevitable choice because, as anybody who has ever participated in an internet forum knows, such “threads” are never linear interactions. In fact, they are rather like a multi-voiced chorus of opinions, comments and narratives where multiple discussions (on topic, or off-topic) involving two or more participants take place at the same time. Therefore, reporting the extracts it is important to help the reader to focus on those segments that constitute meaningful dialogic exchanges within the threads. At the same time it is useful to provide information on the contextual dimension of the data, e.g. reporting the number of posts for each discussion, the discussion topics and so on, reducing as much as reasonably possible the tendency to base the interpretation on isolated discursive fragments.

Extract 1

Discussion's title: what will you do when you grow up?

Total posts: 19

Participants: 15

Post 1

sunshinecat77 (Female, graduate) What would you like to do when you grow up? How do you see your future? Do you have a dream? You have worked hard (well, maybe not always...) to become psychologists... how are you going to benefit from your valuable new skills?

Post 3

Hotelsicilia (gender undisclosed, graduate) What will I do when I grow up? That's a big problem. Do you know whether it's possible to do an internship in a police department? I am very interested in this sector. Let me know if you can help me, or if anybody can. Bye bye...

Post 4

Daistica (male, graduate) Reflecting on all this made me realise that, unfortunately, it's not easy to make the right decision for our professional development, also because the only possible route appears to be the one to the notorious psychotherapy school, which takes four long years... Well, fair enough but how long will it take to train as a psychologist? 10-12 years (university, internship, state exam, specialisation school), and then? Our training doesn't seem to give you any guarantee at all. Do we realise that if everything goes well we'll start working when we'll be 30 or even older? I admit it, perhaps in this moment I have a pretty negative outlook, but (...) I am 27 and I am still doing my internship, and God knows what's going to happen to me.

Bye!

Post 5

Han Solo78it (male, student) Hi everybody! I Hope I will be able to be a psychologist, like probably all of you guys. Cheer up! (...)

Bye.

Post 12

Daistica (male, graduate) Do you know what I am noticing? All this confusion we wannabe psychologists have (...) reflects the poor level of information we received from the universities (...) I got my degree some months ago, but I am extremely

confused because nobody ever showed what I could do (...). The problem is that many pretend not to see this (sometimes is much more easy to pretend not to see...), and we have to put together small pieces of information coming from here and there, to eventually make a choice about which we actually know very little.

Post 13

Bridget jones (female, graduate) I totally agree with you. Since I graduated the road to the profession... seemed a sort of treasure hunt without clues. I mean, I know I have to go somewhere, but I hardly know where I want to go and I don't know absolutely how to get there!!!

The thread starts with an informal and friendly invitation to join the discussion, the answers provided show confusion ("I am extremely confused because nobody ever showed me what I could do") and uncertainty ("The road to the profession seemed a sort of treasure hunt without clues"). It is interesting how Daistica (post 4) joins the discussion pointing out his "reflection". The general tone of the discussion contributes to create a familiar and non-judgmental environment where the participants can genuinely "recognise" each other, exploring the problematic dimensions of their, still forming and clearly peripheral ("all this confusion we wannabe psychologists have"), identities as psychologists, sharing concerns and fears.

The next extract provides an additional example. The discussion starts as an attempt to gather information about tax-related issues for young psychologists and the peripheral condition is conveyed indirectly by the short narratives told to share experiences and concerns.

Extract 2

Discussion's title: Tax issues for young psychologists

Total posts: 18

Participants: 10

Post 1

marianna80 (female, graduate). Hi everybody, I am trying to write an article about taxes, in particular about how much and when we should pay. Obviously, the article is aimed at us young psychology graduates. If anybody has questions, we'll try to

answer together. I am sure the resulting article will be very interesting and useful to everyone. Thanks.

Post 8

Pilviafra (female, professional) I have worked as a psychologist in a therapeutic centre. If you earn less than 5.000 Euros and you work for less than 30 days in a year (in total) they will issue you a receipt for a one-off collaboration, which will be taxed (...). I don't know anything else!!! Thanks for the information!

Post 14

Anna5 (Female, graduate) Hi, I have a question for all of you. Does it make sense to subscribe to a pension scheme when you are hired by a private employer (...) for only three months?

Post 18

Clietta (Female, graduate) Hello everybody, I am starting a private psychology office for couple and family counselling with a friend of mine. Unfortunately the office will be open only one afternoon a week for the moment (fair enough for us, as we need to understand how things are going to be like). The accountant told us that we both need to have a tax code as "private business" (...). This doesn't really make me happy, considering that there won't be any earnings in the first stage, but on the other hand if I want to work as a psychologist (and then psychotherapist) I believe this is the best way to test me...

Besides the kind of activity (reflexive dialogue) taking place and the actors involved (who represent themselves as "peripheral" young psychologists), another important situational dimension in the discussion room was defined by the fact that interactions were based on several features that are typical of internet forums, mainly the partial anonymity and extended time span of the online discussions. All members could decide either to use their real names or fictional ones (nicknames), all users' profiles are public. The discussions could last for weeks, sometimes for months in the case of particularly engaging topics, and they were permanently stored, and always accessible, even when people were no longer participating.

5.3.2 The role of the moderator

In this section, the role of the moderator as an important situational variable of the the online discussions will be explored in further detail. During an early informal interview with

Nico (27th April 2005), the main moderator of the discussion room analysed in this thesis and one of the administrators and founders of the community, I attempted to explore directly his involvement and his personal role as facilitator in the online dynamics. During the interview he stressed how the online forum had successfully passed the “infancy” stage to enter a phase he defined as “expansion by inertia”, whereby the community was steadily increasing its user base, experiencing also a growth in the participation level, without an increase in the level of support and promotion from the moderators. He defined the community as “self sufficient”, but he also implied that this kind of development was “difficult to control”, especially in those areas of the forum dedicated exclusively to social, informal interaction, where episodes of flaring and other kind of anti-social behaviour took place regularly. He added that “sometimes things happen so quickly that you don’t even have time to reflect on what to do next”. With reference to the collaborative learning processes in the community, he described a situation of “unstructured production of knowledge” with a lot of active participation taking place in the professional and academic forums without any structure.

However, my ethnographic observation in the community highlighted that the moderator still played an important role in the forum, mainly by encouraging participation and making sure that the discussions were relevant to the main theme, and objectives, of the discussion room. His role in setting the “mood” and influencing the discussion topics was important. Nico initiated only 6 out of 20 discussions analysed in the first empirical study, but these were almost always characterised by high levels of reflection and debate. It could be argued that he played the role of a catalyst on some occasions, raising issues and concerns with which other participants resonated on a very personal level. On the one hand, this is consistent with existing research on the role of the moderator in online discussion forums (Berge & Collins, 2000; Gray, 2004; Mason, 1994); on the other, it also reminds us of the risks of “essentialising” the experiences of any group of people engaged in any type of interaction, by assuming that they are free and inherently able to represent their own interests transparently (Spivak, 1988). In this sense, the role of the moderator in the discussion room was that of an enabler who actively, if perhaps unintentionally, contributed to set some of the situational conditions that made reflection possible. Such role appears to be very similar to the role of the researcher during an action research process (Atweh et al, 1998), which suggests treating the facilitation of networked environments as a participatory research process - a complex process of inquiry and communication aimed at increasing self-awareness and reflection. In fact, the role of the moderator could be object of an entire research project in its own right, one which unfortunately could not be undertaken in the context of this PhD.

5.3.3 Themes of identity: the cultural models

Three cultural models appeared to be employed by the participants: three implicit and culturally informed theories about “being a psychologist”. More specifically, the coding procedure led to the identification of three discursive themes within the interactions: *Psychologists under Threat*, *Psychology and Health* and *Disempowered Psychologists*.

1. *Psychologists under Threat*

In many posts, psychology was represented as a threatened field in need of protection. A reoccurring element was a sense of real threat, or danger, coming from other professional fields, which tend to invade the sphere that “rightfully” belongs to psychologists.

Extract 3

Discussion title: The Milan Court's Sentence to protect Occupational Psychology: shall we talk about it?!?

Total posts: 17

Participants: 8

Post 1

Nico (male, moderator) Following is an interesting article written by (...), the Professional Body regional secretary for Lazio's region. What do you think about it?

Quote:

(...) We have to acknowledge that the Lombardy section (*of the professional body-Ed.*) met strongly and effectively the demands for a higher level of professional protection (...). The sentence issued by the Milan Court on May 28th (you can find it on the website (...)) constitutes the first official pronouncement against unauthorized professional practices in Occupational Psychology (...).

The court sentenced the defendant (obviously the sentence is not conclusive, and the defendant is likely to appeal) to serve a jail term, unless a fine is paid and all trial's procedural costs are reimbursed (...). The sentence was justified because, among other things, the defendant carried out psychological assessment tests without a degree in Psychology (...).

Post 2

Orie (Female, professional) Hi Nico, I have joined this forum only recently, but I am glad to see already topics I really care about. I have been working in occupational psychology for some years now and I keep seeing abuses, especially in recruitment and career counselling. Non-psychologists who use tests bought in bookshops, or “made up”, who write profiles (...). Improper practices are not permitted and punished in other professions (see doctors), why doesn't it happen also in our profession? What can we do about it??

Post 9

Gep (female, student) (...) although they are not psychologists, many use tests that only psychologists are entitled to use, and this is totally wrong, not only from a legal point of view. It would be fair if the law gave us what we are entitled to (...)

I DEMAND that such (psychological) tasks should be left to those who have the right experience, and without UNREGULATED competition.... For example, I wouldn't even dare doing a tracheotomy without a medicine degree, therefore I wish that competencies inventories and the like were not used by people without a proper qualification!

Post 11

Psicolvan83 (male, student) (...) if they wanted to be counsellors, use tests, they could have enrolled to a psychology course! Why do they keep STEALING opportunities from people, who worked their arses off for at least 5 years, to become occupational psychologists? (...)

The discussion topic is about a sentence issued by an important and influential Court (Milan) against unauthorised professional services carried out without a formal degree in Psychology. Nico (the moderator) reports an article from an official publication written by a representative of the professional body, who describes the sentence and welcomes it. The ensuing exchanges are based on a general agreement about the sentence, and they quickly evolve into a discussion about professional boundaries.

During the discussion official and semi-official titles (“occupational psychologists” “non-psychologists”, “counsellors”) and professional practices (using “psychological tests”) become criteria of access, and are used to draw a line between legitimate and illegitimate “professionals”. The language in use reinforces even more the sense of threat (“abuse”, “stealing”). Gep (post 9) “demands” that, as she would ever do a tracheotomy without a medical qualification, so someone who is not a psychologist should not administer a test without a proper qualification.

It is important to remember that views about the necessity of statutory regulations are widespread, partially justified and often shared by professionals and their clients alike, and

not restricted to psychology in Italy. However, the recurrence of such themes in the online discussions suggests that, in this particular case, the sense of threat and the need of protection played a defining role in how members of the discussion room defined a common identity. The “invasion/abuse” theme in the extracts points to a specific type of cultural model, an implicit theory according to which professions are separated fields of competence and expertise, each with precise criteria that determine who is “in”, and who is “out”.

2. Psychology and health

The problematic relationship between psychology and health was another recurrent theme within the discussions. Very often the threads would go “off-topic” to wind up in debates about the very nature of psychology’s professional practices. Such cases show ambivalence in the way discussion room members tended to constitute (or *not to* constitute) themselves as health professionals. Some of them implicitly assimilated their practices in the health domain; others rejected such health centred aspects of their professional identity, to reclaim professional values and outputs which are specific to psychology. Following is an example.

Extract 5

Discussion’s title: Homeopathy

Total posts: 10

Total participants: 6

Post 1

Salusmundi (female – graduate) I would like to know your opinion about the use of homeopathy by psychologists. Why can’t psychologists (provided they have the right training) use homeopathy like doctors?

Post 5

Rasputin (Male, graduate) I believe the psychologist should work with the mind; therefore homeopathy is not a psychological area of competence. I think it would be more useful to know, for example, autogenic training techniques.

Post 6

Pollianna (Female, graduate) Homeopathy, “alternative” as it might be, is still a branch of medicine. Homeopathic remedies are drugs and, as such, they should be prescribed by doctors who, better than us psychologists, know the human body’s physiology and can recognise the symptoms and the progression of pathologies. It is also true that homeopathy deals with people’s souls and minds and, therefore, we should have at least the possibility to study this discipline... But I believe it’s a bit like with drugs... doctors hold very tight on “their” areas of competence and certainly they are not going to give up on such profitable businesses.

Post 8

Salusmundi (Female, graduate) (...) I think there are other valid tools complementing the word that psychologists could use to cure a patient.... If we could see the patient in his totality we would work more effectively. (...). Anyway, I would like to point out that not just “some doctors” use homeopathy but thousands, millions of users (...). We are talking about doctors who have decided to implement different means to achieve their goal: to cure.

The author of the first post, nicknaming herself “salusmundi” (“health of the world”), initiates a discussion about the possible use of homeopathic treatments in psychology/psychotherapy. However, the interesting aspect is not homeopathy itself and its debatable “scientific” nature, but how this particular practice is used in the discourse to make psychology’s goal explicit (what psychologists actually “do”).

Psychologists are represented as engaged in an unfair competition with doctors, with an uneven distribution of “tools” (psychologists have just “the word”), but with the same ultimate objective: to cure. The theme of confused (and therefore threatened) professional boundaries is still central here, but very much specific to the relationship with the health-related domain. Some, like Rasputin (post 5), categorically separate the “areas of competence” drawing on a “body vs. mind” discourse. Pollianna (post 6) reinforces and further justifies the distinction (“Homeopathic remedies are drugs and, as such, they should be prescribed by doctors who, better than us psychologists, know the human body’s physiology”). However, she also suggests that psychologists should at least be given the chance to access such practices, because they deal with “souls and minds” to a certain extent. In her post, she also hints at how the whole situation is again a matter of power, with doctors “holding tight” on their “profitable areas”.

Following are some exchanges from a discussion that, again, show how this double-sidedness is articulated. What kick-starts the discussion is the reporting of a gross misunderstanding of the psychological practices.

Extract 6

Discussion's title: Communicating the profession to the society

Total posts: 8

Total participants: 6

Post 1

Nico (male, moderator) Yesterday I found a very interesting discussion (*on another internet forum – Ed*) (...) A woman suffering from anxiety tells that she went to a psychoanalyst and that he messed her up even more. The discussion continues until this naïve suggestion made by another participant:

Quote:

I wouldn't know what to do from a legal point of view; however I suggest you take a completely different route.

We have had enough of attempts to poison people, desensitising them with drugs! Unfortunately our society is addicted to such substances. Forgive me if I am using slightly aggressive tones...but this is the truth...unfortunately psychologists, due to a limited and wrong training, tend to cure with drugs, but doing that they only annihilate people!

(...)

Well, I'd like to ask your opinion about this.

The discussion topic is about the psychologists' ability to communicate a correct image of their profession to the larger society. Nico, the room moderator, reports a fragment from an on-line discussion (from another internet forum), which shows a seemingly "naïve" (according to Nico) idea of the psychological practices in clinical contexts. The discussion quickly shifts from general communication issues to a rather more specific debate about the nature and the outputs of professional psychology, and its troubled relationships with the health domain.

Post 5

Vlisse (male, professional) The view largely shared across institutions (health system, university, communities etc.) is part of the negative mythology of the profession, and strengthen the illusion that a psychologist is a person who diagnoses and cures.

Bollocks! A psychologist, a real one, thinks and communicates (in every context).

Post 6

Ifx (Male, graduate) I agree totally with Vlisse when he says

Quote:

Bollocks! A psychologist, a real one, thinks and communicates (in every context).

In my opinion a psychologist doesn't CURE!!! Curing someone presupposes a recovery, and I don't think you can actually talk in such terms in psychology.... (...).

Post 7

Max (Male – graduate) It will take more than one generation to change our culture (...) Medicine is one of the more flawed branches of science, but it is still considered as the solution to every problem, while psychologists are seen as bunch of charlatans good with words, but detached from reality!!! The situation is even more complicated because, to make a stupid example, a broken arm is much simpler to explain than a depression and people are scared by this, they are scared because they are ignorant, preferring a handful of pills prescribed by their GP rather than a commitment lasting months or years aimed at a real improvement.

Post 8

Latentimpulses (female, graduate) Regarding the concept of cure, I believe we need to (*apply it – Ed.*) to the individual as a whole, rather than just on a part of him. The mind and the body should be considered only as the starting points... maybe the future belongs to a "doctor-psychologist" (...).

Both Vlisse (post 5) and Ifx (post 6) strongly reject the whole notion of cure as foreign to the aims of psychological practices ("curing someone presupposes a recovery, and I don't think you can actually talk in such in terms in psychology"). In very similar terms, Max (post 7) introduces the concept of "real improvement". Such a condition, which appears to

be a more existential and “holistic” dimension of well-being opposed to the symptomatic and reductive approach of medicine, is achievable only through a “commitment lasting months or years”. This concept, however, is clearly constructed as weak and difficult to explain to the “ignorant” public.

What emerges from the discussion is a struggle to define a clear set of specific objectives, a commitment to some kind of beneficial “outcome” that psychology, intended as a professional practice, is expected to deliver. The last post (Latentimpulses, post 8) is particularly interesting as it articulates the traditional “mind vs. body” opposition not as dilemmatic and inherently distinctive, but as resolvable through the “merging” of psychologists and doctors (“maybe the future belongs to a doctor-psychologist”).

Like before, also in this case it is possible to infer from the exchanges an underlying cultural model, an “implicit theory” according to which psychology is a *health related profession* based on the principle of “diagnosis”, and relying on a set of tools and practices (like psychotherapy) whose main output is the solution of patients’ problems. This model is uncritically used by some and totally disavowed by others who, however, struggle to find a suitable alternative.

3. Disempowered psychologists

Often those involved in the discussions represented themselves as a disempowered, devalued social group. They would mention the erosion of representative power that damages psychologists, often blaming the increasing popularisation of the discipline which undermines its scientific value and causes a dramatic loss of social status:

Extract 4

Discussion’s title: taking care of our profession

Total posts: 19

Total participants: 8

Post 1

Nico (male, moderator) How many of you know anything about our profession’s governance? Are they managing us well, or not? Could we improve the situation? Once more I have the feeling that we tend to blindly entrust our future to people we don’t know, and whose existence we sometimes ignore altogether... On the other hand those who are

in charge are committed to carefully filter information (...) do you think this is irrelevant?!?
I'd like to have your feedback.

Post 2

Vlisse (male, professional) This is a fact, and it is very serious. Every now and then a glossy magazine that reminds me of a bank brochure finds its way into the post. Inside are pages after pages of words that betray a total void of concepts, projects and hopes. On every page the same people's names (...) then tables and figures: how many are those, how much of this and that. That's undignified cockiness (...).

Post 10

Almaserena (female, graduate) (...) and one more thing, there are so many pseudo-magazines that describe psychology as an everyday thing, taking away all its real scientific value and leading profanes to believe that even your neighbour can give you psychological advice, without mentioning the TV performances of some psychology gurus! Enough, enough, enough!

Post 14

Vertigo (male, professional) (...) I have posted many messages in the forum about such things but honestly it seems that the only concern among psychologists is to bend down on their knees and accept anything is imposed on them just to feel like "psychologists", and to be able to have their training and professionalism recognised (...) in a country and in a culture that, incomprehensibly and absurdly, do not recognise the very same education they gave you, which is certified by an official degree.

Post 15

Karmen (female, professional) Why does this happen only here? In the United States psychologists do everything, they have a say during public elections, have a place in court rooms, in schools, they invest in research, the profession there is growing, developing... why do we just keep talking... talking... talking. (...) Let's rediscover our professional dignity, if we really want society to recognise our profession's important role.

The extract seems to confirm the problematic and peripheral (and somewhat ambivalent) relationship with the "official" community of psychology, symbolised by the professional body. In the example discussed in the *Psychologists under Threat* cultural model the professional body was praised for having undertaken legal action against an unqualified professional; in the extract reported above it is harshly criticised for being a distant and bureaucratic power core, uninterested in the actual necessities of its members, who are underrepresented and weak in the larger society. Some of the posts tend to favour a victimising discourse, showing a remarkable amount of frustration (according to Vertigo

“the only concern among psychologists is to bend down on their knees and accept anything is imposed on them”).

The comparison with the USA further contributes to the construction of the relationship between psychology and society in terms of power, particularly in terms of institutional recognition, authoritativeness and active participation in power-related contexts (like the courtrooms and the public elections mentioned in the excerpt). The underlying cultural model seems to be related to an implicit belief about professions, according to which they are, again, separate fields, this time not in terms of expertise, but clearly in terms of influence and power; gateways towards a higher socio-cultural status.

5.3.4 Situated meanings and cultural models as recognition work

In this final paragraph I wish to suggest that participants in OPSonline’s discussion room were defining situated meanings and using cultural models to engage in a social language and achieve a specific mutual recognition. Situated meanings refer to *who* says something and *how* he/she says it in a specific context, cultural models refer to *what* is being actually said. The interaction between situated meanings and cultural models allows the emergence of Discourses (with a capital D) which, in Gee’s model, refer to complex, multifaceted ways to “pull off” an identity. People use Discourses to recognise themselves and be recognised in a certain way: this is what Gee calls “recognition work”.

More specifically, members in OPSonline’s discussion room “On the psychological professions” were recognising themselves using a specific, reflective, “young psychologists’ Discourse”, this Discourse resulted into a common identity that is represented as:

- a) Peripheral.
- b) Based on a strict separation between areas of competence, expertise, influence and power.
- c) Ambiguously included within the same domain of the health professions, with which it might sometimes share the aims (solving the problems of “patients”), but not the social status.

It is important to point out that what emerged from the interpretation does not necessarily reflect the identity of all young psychologists and psychology students in Italy, nor does it represents the identity of all members involved in OPSonline’s forum. In fact, other aspects of a common identity would probably emerge as more relevant if the same participants were engaged in another dialogic, discursive situation, like in another discussion room within the forum, moderated by someone who, unlike Nico, was less able

to voice concerns which were relevant, although still “situational”, in terms of recognition work.

The type of methodology used in this thesis cannot support claims which go beyond the specific context analysed. In fact, this was never my intention. From the beginning, I was not interested in achieving a general understanding of how the professional identity of psychologists is constructed in Italy. Gee’s framework was preferred to others precisely for its emphasis on the contextual and situated nature of discourse. In this sense, a focus on situated meanings and cultural models serves a specific objective: to investigate how people in specific situations engage in recognition work, using cultural and situated resources to be recognised in a certain way.

Summary

In this chapter I have reported the first study which investigated the construction of a common identity through online asynchronous interactions. The research was carried out in a discussion room in a forum of psychology students and professionals: OPSonline (Obiettivo Psicologia online). The coding procedure was based on a blend of inductive and deductive approaches, in order to strike a balance between data-driven inquiry, which often lacks general theoretical implications, and theory-driven inquiry, which often tends to impose pre-existing categories on the data.

The analysis suggested that participants in the online discussion room used situated meanings and cultural models to achieve a specific mutual recognition. More specifically, the interplay between situated meanings and cultural models influenced the way participants “recognised” themselves during the discussions, resulting in the definition of a common identity as “young psychologists”.

In the next chapter I will triangulate these findings with those emerged from a series of interviews and “real life” observations, in order to add consistency and credibility to the interpretation so far proposed.

6. Triangulating the findings

In this chapter, I will describe the second empirical study, exploring the analogies and differences between the online asynchronous discussions, and interviews carried out through synchronous real-time messaging. More specifically, I will “triangulate” the findings emerged in the first study in order to add further analytical depth to and consolidate the findings of the inquiry. Twenty three participants took part in the interviews, which were based on a semi-structured schedule; the interviews explored the participation in the discussion room “on the psychological professions” and the actual experiences of the respondents.

The analysis will be further corroborated by taking into consideration some events that took place in and outside the discussion room while the study was being carried out. In the conclusive discussion, I will suggest, consistently with Gee’s notion about discourse and identity, that the online discussions analysed in the previous chapter and the interviews described in this chapter can be seen as two different situated articulations of recognition work.

6.1 Triangulation

Janesick (2005) noted that qualitative research is usually challenged from the viewpoint of the psychometric paradigm. These challenges revolve systematically around the trinity of validity, reliability and generalisability, “as if there were no other linguistic representations” (Janesick, 2005, p. 393) to describe the inevitable necessity to check empirical findings. Therefore, rather than relying on a borrowed terminology, qualitative research has offered an alternative way to think and talk about the evaluation of its findings. This alternative language is concerned with the solidity of descriptions and explanations, and whether or not they fit with each other comfortably and in a credible manner. Furthermore, qualitative researchers continuously remind their audience that, in any case, there is never one best or most correct way to interpret a phenomenon. Different contextual factors produce, reveal and enable the display of different kinds of understandings and identities (Fine & Weis, 1996).

One way to evaluate qualitative findings is through triangulation. This procedure is not exclusive to qualitative inquiry. In quantitative research triangulation occurs when different items within the same scale measure the same construct, or when two different scales join up to measure the same construct. In qualitative research, triangulation refers instead to the use of multiple perceptions to clarify meanings and avoid misinterpretations. Denzin (1978) identified four basic types of triangulation:

- *data triangulation*: the use of a variety of data sources in a study;
- *investigator triangulation*: the use of several different researchers or evaluators;
- *theory triangulation*: the use of multiple perspectives to interpret a single set of data;
- *methodological triangulation*: the use of multiple methods to study a single problem.

According to Flick (2002), triangulation reflects an attempt to secure an in-depth understanding of the phenomena analysed. In this sense, it is not a tool or a strategy of validation but it represents an alternative to validation. Combining multiple methodological practices, empirical materials and perspectives, triangulation configures a strategy that adds rigour and complexity to a qualitative inquiry.

Richardson (2000) carried even further the discussion about the specificity of evaluation procedures in qualitative research. He noted that the concept of triangulation often carries the assumption that there is a “fixed point” or “object” that can be triangulated. Therefore he proposed a different metaphor: the crystal.

“We recognise that there are far more than “three sides” from which to approach the world. I propose that the central imaginary for “validity” for postmodernist texts is not the triangle - a rigid, fixed, two dimensional object. Rather, the central imaginary is the crystal, which combines symmetry and substance with an infinite variety of shapes, substances, transmutations, multidimensionalities and angles of approach. Crystals grow, change, alter, but are not amorphous. Crystals are prisms that reflect externalities *and* refract within themselves, creating different colours, patterns and arrays, casting off in different directions. What we see depends on our angle of repose.” (Richardson, 2000 p. 934).

In this chapter I will stick to a more traditional view of triangulation. More specifically, I will use 23 interviews to triangulate the findings emerged from the first study. Furthermore, I

will describe some events that took place in and outside the discussion room while the study was being carried out. The kind of triangulation I refer to is “data triangulation”, because it is based on the same methodological and theoretical background as the first study, but it adds depth and complexity to the interpretation taking into account other sources of data. The aim is not to make the findings more generalisable, but more *credible* (Silverman, 2001). I attempted to do this by providing, in the first place, an account of the criteria used for the selection of the data and for the analysis (see previous chapter), engaging in a discussion of how themes, concepts and categories were derived from the data, and always trying to make a clear distinction between the data and its interpretation.

6.2 *The interviews*

6.2.1 Introduction

In November 2005 the administrators of the community granted me access to the administration panel. An announcement (see below) was posted in the discussion room and e-mailed to all registered members in order to recruit respondents; 23 members replied to volunteer as participants. Following is the (translated) post/email:

Dear Opsonline's member

Are you willing to take part in a research?

My name is Carlo Perrotta and I am a PhD student in the department of psychology at the University of Bath in England. The objective of my thesis is to investigate the relationship between participation in a specific online context and the construction of a common identity. The study is now in the second stage, which will be based on interviews. The interview lasts approximately 45 minutes; it is text-based, and conducted in real time through MSN messenger, Skype (no phoning) or MIRC. The questions are about your participation in the forum and your professional and/or academic life; nothing personal, embarrassing or sensitive. If you agree to participate, simply reply to this post/email to arrange an appointment online. Do not hesitate to contact me if you wish to receive more detailed information about the research or about how the interviews are going to be analysed.

Thank you for your valuable time and collaboration.

6.2.2 Method

Gee's discourse analysis provided again a methodological and theoretical framework that informed all phases of the coding, including the interpretation work. The following is a brief summary of what this methodology entails (see methodological chapter for further details), especially in the context of this thesis. The focus is on situated meanings and cultural models, which are seen as two interdependent aspects: the specific situation (what is going on, who are the agents and how they represent themselves, what assumptions are shared, and so on) and the cultural elements that frame that particular situation in a given moment in history. Situated meanings pertain to *who* says (or does) something and *how* he/she says it (or does it) in a specific context, cultural models pertain to *what* is being actually said, or done. The interaction between the two allows the emergence of Discourses (with a capital D), which represent complex, multifaceted ways to "pull off" an identity. People use Discourses (situated meanings and cultural models) to recognise themselves and be recognised in a certain way: this is what Gee calls "recognition work". One important methodological aspect differentiated the interviews from the online discussions considered in the previous chapter: the coding scheme had already been identified. This scheme was applied to the interview data in order to be confirmed and strengthened. The scheme was based on two sets of situated meanings:

1. *Peripheral Participation*: this category refers to meanings negotiated by the members of the discussion room in relation to themselves and their experiences. These contribute to the definition of an "affinity space" (Gee, 2005) in which participants share a set of assumptions about who they are: a group of "peripheral" young psychologists engaged in a struggle to gain access to the professional community.

2. *Reflection*: another important set of situated assumptions within the discussion room, relating to the nature of participants' interactions, that is, what they are doing in the discussion room: "reflecting" together on the issues and the challenges of their "peripheral participation".

In addition to the two sets of situated meanings, the coding scheme was based on three cultural models.

1. *Psychologists under Threat*: This category is based on the threat posed by "invading" professional practices. The category draws on a cultural view of psychology as a field kept "under siege" by other professionals, which tend to invade the sphere that "rightfully" belongs to psychologists.

2. *Psychologists and Health*: this category draws on notions of "science" and, in particular, "health" and it is mainly concerned with the perceived "scientific inferiority" of psychology

in relation to medicine and psychiatry, rather than with straightforward, legitimate/non legitimate distinctions.

3. *Psychologists Disempowered*: this category draws on a cultural model that sees psychologists as a disempowered, devalued social group: an implicit theory which constructs the relationship between psychology and society in terms of power, particularly in terms of institutional recognition, authoritativeness and active participation in productive contexts.

The coding process in the second empirical study was relatively more streamlined, as it did not involve the initial phase of open coding and further refinement of the analytical categories, because the analytical scheme was already available (refer to chapter 5 for a detailed description of the analytical process behind the scheme). Therefore, it is necessary to see the study described in this chapter as an extension and a triangulation of the analysis carried out on the online discussions, rather than an independent investigation. The following table (Tab 6.1) reports basic descriptive data for the 5 main categories applied to the interview data. The categories will be described in further detail in the next section, and their relevance to the research question will be explored. The specific nature of the “interview situation” will also be considered.

	The total number of examples coded each category.	The number of interviews in which the free node was coded.
Reflection	16	14
Peripheral participation	21	11
Psychologists under threat	10	6
Psychologists and Health	29	10
Disempowered psychologists	14	8

Table 6.1 Data reports for the categories applied to the interview data.

Participants and interview schedule

There were, in total, 23 participants; these included 18 females and 5 males. Eleven identified themselves as undergraduates, 8 as graduates or post graduates, 4 as professionals. The interviews were based on a semi-structured schedule, the areas explored were the participation within OPSonline and the discussion room “on the psychological professions”, and the general professional experiences and views of the respondents. The questions were inspired by the analytical scheme identified in the previous chapter (chapter 5): they investigated the trajectories of participation in the professional community of psychologists, and shared views and understandings about disciplinary identity and the role of psychologists in the wider social context. Following is the interview schedule, each respondent was asked the same questions, although some variations occurred during the interviews due to the relatively fluid nature of a semi-structured process, in which some aspects might be explored in greater detail than others depending on situational factors and dynamics emerging during the interview (see Silverman, 2005). Every interview lasted approximately 45 minutes.

Now I will ask you some questions about you and your participation in Ops. Relax and take all the time you want to answer, because I am not going anywhere. Write as much as you want and feel free to interrupt me, ask me questions if you wish, etc.

1. Why did you subscribe to the forum, and to the discussion room ‘on the psychological professions’ in particular?
2. Can you describe what you usually do in the discussion room?
3. In which discussions do you post more?
4. What do you think of the profession in Italy?
5. What is the right role for psychologists in our society, according to you?
6. How would you describe yourself and your, either present or future, relationship to the profession?
7. Do you think OPSonline is doing something for the profession?
8. What do you think of the psychological profession, as it is depicted in the discussion room?
9. Has your participation in the discussion room influenced your professional or academic life, or perhaps how you imagine your future professional life? Could you describe in which way?

Has the participation in the discussion room made a difference in how you see yourself?

In order to clarify the analytical process behind the interviews, the following section will report extracts from one interview, which will be commented to illustrate the role of the interviewer in managing or directing the conversation. The extracts will attempt to exemplify how interviewees and interviewer work to construct themselves as certain types of people in relation to the topic of the interview and, reflexively, the interview itself. This is coherent with the work of Holstein and Gulbrium (1997) and with Gee's idea of recognition work in a situated context (1999). Paragraph 6.3 will provide additional insights into the specific situational aspects of the interviews.

Extract 1

<i>Interviewer</i>	<i>In which discussions do you post more?</i>
<i>Elisa (Female, graduate)</i>	well let's say that recently there isn't much to say
<i>Interviewer</i>	<i>What do you mean?</i>
<i>Elisa</i>	I mean there aren't many good things to say about jobs! In fact there aren't jobs at all. Don't misunderstand! I know that a job is just a job but I was hoping that my professional life would be a bit more rewarding.

After the initial questions, Elisa (a recent graduate) is asked in which discussions she posts more. She replies that "recently there isn't much to say", prompting a clarification question from the interviewer ("what do you mean?"). The unplanned question directs the conversation to what will emerge as the main theme in this interview, as well as in others. In her answer, the respondent tends to represent herself referring to the peripheral nature of her participation in the actual profession. However, the simple request for clarification which triggers the theme illustrates how the interview is no longer an online asynchronous exchange between "peers", but a synchronous interaction with a "foreign" actor. During this process of mutual reflection, the respondent's construction as a peripheral psychologist is mirrored by the interviewer's construction as a sympathetic fellow psychologist.

Extract 2

<i>Interviewer</i>	<i>I see, well I know it's not easy</i>
<i>Elisa (Female, graduate)</i>	I thought you were in a better situation than mine... are you telling me you are no different? sorry I don't mean to pry!!!
<i>Interviewer</i>	<i>Don't worry at all... now things are better, but I have been through some of the same things you are describing.</i>
<i>Elisa</i>	I cannot see you, but I I can sense you know what we psychologists in Italy are moaning about...

Such mutual mirroring contributes to challenge the notion according to which the interviews are objective accounts, while they resemble more points where different narratives and recognitions (identities) intersect (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). This interview, like the others, took place online through real-time messaging. It is worth reminding that the translation from Italian to English strived to maintain the original syntactical structure whenever possible, and that possible translation effects were significantly reduced by the textual nature of the data, which obviously lacked features such as intonation, internal signs (loudness, syllable lengthening) and non-verbal aspects (pauses, overlaps and overlays).

Like the one reported above, all interviews were conducted through real time messaging, that is, synchronous CMC. The transcripts were analysed and coded through an iterative process looking for patterns of meaning and reoccurring categories. Like in the first study, the software for qualitative analysis Nvivo was a valuable support during all stages of the process. The coding procedure already described in chapter 5 was applied substantially unchanged in the study reported in this chapter. The reason for conducting the interviews through real time messaging is twofold. In the first place, practical reasons (members were scattered across Italy) made any alternative unviable; secondly, the use of CMC is consistent with the theoretical and methodological choices already made in the previous study, and with the resulting discussion about networked discourse and identity.

6.3 Analysis and interpretation: situated meanings

6.3.1 “Reflection” in the interviews

This section describes how one of the two sets of situated meanings (reflection) was identified in the interviews, but an important clarification is necessary at this point. The “young psychologists’ Discourse” identified in the first empirical study (see chapter 5) was a common and shared dimension of (professional) identity, not static and fixed but grounded in a specific interactive context: the online discussion room. Those who participated in the discussions shared a common understanding about “who” they were in that particular context, and what they were doing: they tended to constitute themselves as peripheral young psychologists, engaged in a reflective dialogue to address professional issues. These two aspects, reflective discourse and peripherality, were the context-specific dimensions (the situated meanings) of the common identity that was actively constructed in the online discussions. They constituted a background for the subsequent analysis of other identity-related aspects which were object of negotiation in the interactions, the three cultural models: Psychologists under Threat, Disempowered Psychologists and Psychology and Health.

However, as also mentioned in the previous paragraph, the “interview situation” was no longer based on an online asynchronous exchange between peer members, but on a synchronous interview with a “foreign” actor. In this context, the specific questions and clarification prompts asked during the interview (see the interview schedule and the related discussion in the previous section) contributed to define the shared assumptions between the agents involved: the interviewer and the interviewees. In other words, the interview process, with its specific aims, rules and “unexpected” turns was an *ethnographic context* in which specific instances of “reflection” could be identified; these were instances, like the one reported in the previous section, in which interviewer and interviewees reached a common understanding about the purpose of the interview (to have a reflective conversation about personal and professional trajectories), turning the interview itself in an “affinity space” (Gee, 2005) similar to the online discussion rooms explored in the previous chapter. Following is another example of this discursive dynamic.

Extract 3

Interviewer	Can you describe what you usually do in the discussion room?
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<i>Daniele (male, student)</i>	I am quite active because I find that the online interactions between members lead to a lot of good relationships.
<i>Interviewer</i>	<i>Ok... could you tell me what kind of relationships you are referring to?</i>
<i>Daniele</i>	Well, for me it's easier to maintain a certain type of dialogue on line, I personally try to be tolerant and respectful with everyone although often we have completely different views. in real life, you say things but I find there is not a real exchange (...) I think online there is more a will to express relevant parts of one's life, perhaps tensions or even some negative feelings, Like in this interview... It would be quicker face to face, but having to write makes it easier for me to articulate certain things.

In the extract reported above, like in extracts 2 and 3, the answer provided to one of the standard interview questions (“what do you usually do in the discussion room?”) triggers a branching question to explore further what seemed to be an interesting theme (online relationships). In his reply Daniele clarifies that, according to him, online communication can help express personal and sometimes difficult views. Through this simple exchange the interviewer and the respondent contribute to the definition of the interview as a specific situation where “reflection” becomes possible (“having to write makes it easier for me to articulate certain things”).

6.3.2 “peripheral participation” in the interviews

The previous section illustrated how the interview process allowed the respondents to express their views on the state of the profession, considering the implications for their own career trajectories. In their answers, the respondents also represented themselves referring once more to the peripheral nature of their professional experience suggesting that the common assumption about “who they were” that characterised the online discussion was recurring across the interviews. Consider the following extracts:

Extract 4

<i>Interviewer</i>	<i>How would you describe yourself and your, either present or future, relationship to the profession?</i>
<i>Eleonora (female, student)</i>	(...) well, I see my future professional life as quite far off, as I have chosen a rather long route. I'd like to work in court, dealing with cases of child abuse, child violence, adoptions, divorces.... (...)I think I am still far from that.

Extract 5

<i>Interviewer</i>	<i>How would you describe yourself and your, either present or future, relationship to the profession?</i>
<i>Matteo (male, graduate)</i>	I am afraid I find it very hard to see my future as a psychologist. I would like to be a psychologist who knows the real world and how things really are, because this is the best strategy to help patients. If you don't manage to understand the reality of those facing you, you will never be able to be a good psychologist (...)

Extract 6

<i>Interviewer</i>	<i>What kind of psychologist, or future psychologist, are you? How would you describe your "professional side"?</i>
<i>Antonio, male, (graduate)</i>	Well I think I am still very far from an intense professional life I think I will need years (...) I am not in a hurry. My mind is focused on training It doesn't matter how long it takes, what really counts is to keep learning

Extract 7

Eternity (female, graduate)

Honestly, I really can't imagine (myself as a psychologist). I must say I never regret the choices I made, after school I was sure I wanted to be a psychologist and I still am, I would have liked to work more in criminology

but after my internship experience I have changed plans a bit

I think it will take years (...)

Now I am bit stuck

Don't know what to do

Extract 8

Elisa (female, graduate)

In my dreams , I would tell you I will be a brave psychologist, and a great teacher... but the reality is different

Sometimes I think it would be easier to just go to work in a post office

We can note in the extracts the recurrent construction of a professional world still very far off in time ("I see my future professional life quite far off"; "I think I am still very far away from an intense professional life"; "I think it will take years"), and a feeling of alienation from what is "real" ("I would like to be a psychologist who knows the real world"; "the reality is different"). This discursive self-representation is sometimes accompanied by an optimistic outlook ("it doesn't matter how long it takes, what really counts is to keep learning"), but more often by disillusionment and uncertainty ("now I am bit stuck"; "sometimes I think it would be easier to just go to work in a post office"). The way respondents see themselves in the specific context of the interview, and implicitly wish to be seen by the interviewer, is consistent with the notion of "peripherality" already discussed in the previous chapter.

6.4 Analysis and interpretation: the cultural models

6.4.1 The cultural models in the interviews

The same “disclaimer” about the specific nature of the interview situation applies to the analysis of the cultural models: the historically defined beliefs and informal theories which were dialectically negotiated in the discourse. The respondents clearly drew on the same themes, and the same underlying models, discussed in the first study: Psychology under Threat, Disempowered Psychologists and Psychology and Health. However, some fine-grained differences suggested that these models were used in the new situation (the interview) to achieve a different type of recognition. This suggestion draws on a fundamental theoretical assumption according to which identities are never static, but rely on several interrelated Discourses, enacted within the same social language in order to achieve different recognitions, depending on the situation and the interlocutors (Gee, 1998; see also chapter 4 in this thesis). The three cultural models will be briefly described in this section; the next paragraph will discuss in more detail how such models were actually “used” in the process of identity construction.

Psychology under Threat

In the interviews psychology was constructed once more as a threatened territory, which could end up disappearing altogether if some sort of action is not undertaken. The “invasion/abuse” theme was supported, like in the first study, by an implicit theory, a specific cultural model, according to which professions are separated fields of competence and expertise, with precise criteria determining who is “in”, and who is “out”.

Extract 9

<i>Interviewer</i>	<i>What do you think of the profession in Italy?</i>
<i>Dario (Male, student)</i>	There is still so much to do
<i>Interviewer</i>	<i>For example?</i>
<i>Dario</i>	I think that, as long as the market doesn't value the psychological profession things are not going to change

I am particularly concerned about occupational psychology
 Which is my field
 And which has been brutalised
 We ought to do more
 to protect our profession
 Especially on a legislative level
 Nowadays everybody claims to be an expert psychologist
 Especially here in the south
 it really sucks!!!

<i>Interviewer</i>	<i>Who do you think is "brutalizing" the work of occupational psychologists?</i>
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<i>Dario</i>	(...) you name them, at least here in the south People with high school diplomas Law graduates business graduates political sciences graduates Education graduates even modern languages graduates it really sucks!!!
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Extract 10

<i>Interviewer</i>	<i>What do you think about the current state of the profession in Italy?</i>
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<i>Eleonora (Female, student)</i>	According to what I have read around, and to what I have understood, psychology in Italy is not having a good time, considering what's happening with the clinical specialization and the doctors. Well, I believe that this profession is bothering other professional figures, and that those figures are trying to eliminate us
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<i>Interviewer</i>	<i>"Eliminate"? What do you mean?</i>
	<i>What are these figures?</i>
<i>Eleonora</i>	<p>Well, recently the MIUR (<i>the Italian Ministry for high education and research - Ed</i>) approved a bill, according to which postgraduate specialization courses in clinical psychology are now open also to medicine graduates, and those competences that were exclusive to psychologists, from now on will be shared with medicine graduates</p> <p>(<i>This bill - Ed</i>) robs us of something that belongs to us, something that was our prerogative, and for me this is an attack to our professional community</p> <p>It's like doctors were trying to replace psychologists, to make our profession disappear altogether</p>

In extract 9 Dario describes an army of "people with high school diplomas" and generic graduates who "brutalise" the field of occupational psychology, while in extract 10, doctors are depicted by Eleonora almost as bent on the "elimination" of psychologists ("I believe that this profession is bothering other professional figures, and that those figures are trying to eliminate us").

Disempowered Psychologists

Like in the first study, this theme was based on an implicit belief, a cultural model according to which professions like psychology or medicine are fields defined in terms of the degree of influence and power they can grant to their members. Following are some representative extracts:

Extract 11

<i>Interviewer</i>	<i>What is the right role for psychologists in our society, according to you?</i>
<i>Mattia</i>	There is little to be happy about the current idea of psychologist in our society. Some see us as charlatans, not

<i>(Male, graduate)</i>	<p>much different from astrologers, often there is a big confusion between psychologists, psychiatrists, new age therapists etc. But I also think that we are the ones to blame... have you ever seen one of those psychologists on TV shows, or read their articles in magazines? (...)</p> <p>(...) I can assure there are still psychologists around who will tell you that if you sleep in a curled position, it's because you wish to go back to your mother's womb or that if you argue with your dad, it's because you have castration fantasies. The problem is that some people (who have the movie-inspired idea that every move they make can be the key to interpret their most secret desires) put you in a box... and there are also those who always want to tell you about their last dream.</p>
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Extract 12

<i>Interviewer</i>	<i>What do you think about the current state of the profession in Italy?</i>
<i>Eternity</i> <i>(Female, graduate)</i>	<p>I think (psychology) is not enough valued. People don't have a correct idea about psychologists... it's not like in America, where the psychologist can play an important role in every area... here they have a small role in the health system, an even smaller one in the prison system (where I have done my internship and I have had the chance to see it first hand). (...). Here you have to struggle to succeed</p>
<i>Interviewer</i>	<i>Well, then what do you reckon should be the right role for a psychologist?</i>
<i>Eternity</i>	<p>For me there should be a psychologist in every place</p> <p>Schools, companies, hospitals (...).</p>

In the extracts psychologists are constructed as a disempowered and devalued minority, suffering from lack of social status ("some see us as charlatans") and representative power. The comparison with the idealised American context makes also a comeback (see

chapter 4), with the same representation of an alternative reality where psychologists have more power (“play important roles in every area”) and are more successful.

Psychology and Health

Like in the online discussions, the third theme was based on a two-sided cultural model, used rather ambiguously to construct the output of the psychological profession: psychology as a health–related set of practices, in direct competition with doctors, psychiatrists etc., versus psychology as an independent and specific professional field.

Extract 13

Fox (Female, professional) We (psychologists) working as neuropsychologists have to protect ourselves from geriatric doctors, nurses and therapists (...) and psychiatrists.

(...)

Because those professionals can use tests and conduct clinical interviews just like us, and I think this creates confusion for the patient who doesn’t understand anymore who we are and what we do exactly

Interviewer *What do you think an “ideal psychologist” does, or should do, in his work?*

Fox He should be a professional (...), deal only with the things he knows, defending his expertise (...), he should collaborate and not protect himself from other colleagues, (he should) be up to date and informed but, mostly, he should protect his patients and his profession

Unfortunately, there are psychologists who allow themselves to prescribe drugs because they have an inferiority complex towards the doctors

In extract 13, the confusion about the actual outputs of the professional practice is somehow “projected” on the “patient” but it is not, in fact, resolved. The answer to a direct

question (“what do you think a psychologist should do?”) brings forward the familiar theme of “protection”, rather than an actual distinction; and the conclusion epitomises the problematic relationship between psychologists and doctors (“there are psychologists (with) an inferiority complex towards doctors”).

The following extract, on the other hand, adds another interesting aspect. Marghe is a young doctor who is, nonetheless, a participant in the discussion room, being interested in psychology and attending courses in counselling. Her words show how psychologists are “recognised” from another professional perspective.

Extract 14

Marghe (Female, professional)

I am attending a course to become sexology counsellor

And then I will do some other more specific course in counselling

I am doing an internship as a doctor in a psychiatry department

Interviewer

What do you think of the psychological profession, as it is depicted in the discussion room?

Marghe

I considered the idea of becoming a clinical psychologist

(...) but in the end it seemed I was throwing away 6 years of medical studies to achieve something I could have achieved with 4 years of psychology.

I believe the psychiatrist is much more complete as a professional

The psychologist has a more humanistic background

He studies a lot of philosophy

And he analyses a lot the patient's mind

But sometimes he makes the mistake of not seeing what is objective

The real physical conditions

That's why I say a psychiatrist is more complete

Perhaps not so surprisingly, we can observe in Marghe's answer all the negative elements that constitute the “negative” recognition so much rejected by many other participants:

psychology is a health related profession, but “the psychiatrist is much more complete as a professional”; psychologists are “humanistic”, they analyse “the mind” and are slightly detached from reality (they do not see “what is objective, the real physical conditions”). The extract seems to confirm that such recognition results in the construction of overlapping outputs and practices, and exacerbates the need for distinction and protection.

6.5 Professional identity and agency

The situated meanings and the cultural models described above were being used during the interviews to achieve a specific type of recognition. This became clear during the analysis, in particular while coding and interpreting the answers provided to questions 9 and 10 of the interview schedule. These questions explored whether and how participation in the online discussions influenced the way respondents see themselves as professionals, following are some of the answers:

Extract 15

<i>Interviewer</i>	<i>Do you think the way the profession is depicted in Opsonline, the problems discussed in the discussion room, had, or are having, an impact on the way you imagine your future professional life?</i>
<i>Eleonora (female, student)</i>	Absolutely yes: I can see it already at the university! Since I write in the room many aspects of psychology I didn't know, or I had doubts about, have become clearer. I have learned a lot about work opportunities. I have talked to people who already are professionals, people I have met in OPSonline, who helped me understand what I have to do get where I want to go, people who do my dream job, and this was important to me (...)

Extract 16

<i>Interviewer</i>	<i>Do you think Ops is doing something for the profession?</i>
<i>Elisa (female, graduate)</i>	Well... definitely yes! Talking to many people older than me, signing petitions against the national body of psychologists, receiving e-mails from psychologists with problems, or simply reading posts

	from people who didn't pass the English test just because they didn't buy the lecturer's book, these things certainly influenced me
<i>Interviewer</i>	<i>Has your participation in the discussion room influenced your professional or academic life, or perhaps how you imagine your future professional life? Could you describe in which way?</i>
<i>Elisa</i>	If I didn't know OPSonline's discussion room, probably I'd still be dreaming of an easy and rewarding professional life... But I don't like easy things, That's why I am here
<i>Interviewer</i>	<i>Do you mean that the discussions "opened your eyes"</i>
	<i>On the state of the profession?</i>
<i>Elisa</i>	Yes, it did a bit... let's say that, lately, the discussion room has become a network that links together all those psychologists (students, teachers, professionals) who are trying to get together to fight against injustice...

Extract 17

Francesca (female, professional)

I hope the new generation of psychologists will change attitude, for this is the reason I got involved both in OPSonline's room and Altrapsicologia (Anotherpsychology) with enthusiasm.

(...)

We can't change others but we can change ourselves, and if we stop thinking we are low-level graduates and reclaim, through competence and training, what belongs to us. The problem is that the psychologists who came before us were, not all of them of course, incompetent and arrogant and certainly didn't help the profession.

(...)

(We) are trying to create a new image for psychology, more competent, more professional, more passionate. A psychology that

is willing to collaborate when it's needed and to fight when it's necessary! Our inner growth as a professional category will contribute to change things, and that will be the best form of self-protection.

With the exception of five respondents who claimed that participating in the discussion room did not have significant influences, all the answers constantly pointed to the positive effects in terms of raised awareness and increased opportunities for collaboration and mutual support (like in extract 15). Ten respondents out of eighteen, reflecting on the ways OPSONline influenced their self-perception as professionals, further enriched the picture. Their answers (like in extract 16 and 17) draw again on the meanings previously discussed, mostly the sense of threat and the need to protect the professional boundaries. However, their words implicitly suggest that participation in the discussions led to a different articulation of such meanings. They define their professional identity as a distinctive feature of a group of young actors, who are engaged in a communal “recognition effort”, sometimes against the older generation of professionals.

6.5.1 Going outside

The answers provided to questions 9 and 10 of the interview schedule brought forward a different, more “proactive” dimension. Thanking their participation in the forum for “opening their eyes” and making them more willing to “fight”, the respondents were drawing on a system of values, actions, practices that integrated and enriched the construction of their professional identities, this time in a change-oriented way. The references to the more problematic and negative aspects were accompanied by a sense of social injustice, which gradually shifted the interpretive focus from what was being said during the interviews to the actions and events that seemed to scaffold and empower words.

In the first place, during the period December 2004-January 2006 a number of petitions were publicised in the discussion room and an actual demonstration was organised in Rome to protest against the inadequacies of the professional body (figure 6.1 and 6.2). However, the most notable development was probably the constitution of an explicitly political group (“Anotherpsychology”, also mentioned by Francesca in extract 17, also in figure 6.2), a spin-off “political” project partially originated within Opsonline’s discussion room, whose members ran in the elections for the renewal of the professional body’s

regional representatives. All this culminated in the said elections in January 2006, which achieved a small but significant result (4 representatives elected).



Fig. 6.1 the “demonstrative” behaviour to support the “movement” extends also to graffiti: another psychology is possible!



Fig. 6.2 Anotherpsychology, the spin-off project partially originated within the online discussion room. The picture in the centre of the page shows the demonstration held by psychologists in Rome.

In the next section some implications and the conceptual links with the first empirical study will be discussed in further detail.

6.6 Discussion

The main aim of the interviews was to triangulate the findings of the first study carried out in the online discussion room. The first study led to the emergence of an interpretative scheme based on 2 situated meanings and 3 cultural models; this scheme was explored during the second study, which uncovered further discursive evidence in its support. After the long and intense interpretive work carried out in the empirical study, it could be suggested that the online discussions and the interviews can be seen as two different articulations of recognition work (Gee, 1999). Together, they provide a more satisfying, although not entirely exhaustive, answer to the question this thesis is trying to explore (is the construction of a common identity taking place?). The online discussions were a more or less symmetrical exchange between individuals who explicitly agreed on the objectives and the meanings of a specific situation: the discussion room, with its topic and its rules. We can now see those discussions as a form of “inward-facing” recognition work, that is, members talking to each other and recognising each other using specific, culturally informed discursive resources. In such a situation their recognition tended to stress the negative dimensions of a problematic professional identity: threatened boundaries, confusion and lack of power.

In the interviews, on the other hand, the same discursive resources that characterised the discussions could be identified, but often they were “implemented” differently, to favour a more proactive dimension of identity. This happened precisely because the respondents were no longer talking to each other, and recognising each other. In fact, they were now interacting with the wider social context, which is to some extent symbolised by the “outsider” role of the interviewer/ethnographer. The interviewer, in other words, involuntarily led the identity-related language to important aspects that were implicit in the online discussions and that could have been otherwise missed. In this “new” situation, the “bid for recognition” (Gee, 1999, p. 20) became more explicit and wider-ranging.

This also explains the respondents’ keen references to a dimension parallel to the linguistic one, a dimension where they did not just “talk” online, but also “did” actual things in the “real life”: they signed petitions, went to demonstrations, and so on. In this circumstance, the respondents were engaged in what Gee calls “connection building”, that is, “using cues or clues to make assumptions about how the past and future of an interaction, verbally and non-verbally, are connected to the present moment” (Gee, 1999, p. 86).

As mentioned elsewhere in this thesis, the notion of identity construction is, according to Gee (1999, 2005), based on a complex dialogic activity that always includes both language and “other stuff”, to grasp all the *inter-connected* elements that constitute D-identities (languages, actions and interactions, events, artefacts) a complex and *ethnographic* perspective is needed. From such a perspective, it is possible to see how the “expanded” Discourses described by Gee, and the identities they convey, shape reality and are shaped by it at the same time in a reflective, mutually influencing process. It is a view of discourse that re-frames human agency within a dialogic, dynamic interaction with the world (See Bakhtin, 1981; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Adopting a similar theoretical position, and sharing similar concerns about the role of language and symbolic interaction in communities of learners (or communities of practice) Tusting (2005; see also Fairclough, 1992), suggests that

“Discourse is shaped both by the social order, and by the ongoing activity and struggle involved in every interaction. This activity and struggle cause transformations in discourse which reflect and construct change in the social order more broadly” (Tusting, 2005, p. 45).

Tusting’s words lend themselves well to describe what was going on in, and sometimes outside, the online discussion room analysed in this thesis. When considered together, the online discussions and the interviews convey the constituting dimensions, comprising linguistic and non-linguistic aspects, of a complex Discourse-identity. The evidence extrapolated from the discursive data suggested that the “young psychologists’ Discourse” explored in this chapter, and in the previous one, was as much the inevitable result of the social context where the actors were culturally located, as it represented an original, active “bid” for an alternative recognition, which attempted, to a certain extent, to change that very same context.

Summary

In this chapter I have described the second study carried out to answer the research question (is a common identity being constructed in a specific online context?). The notion of triangulation provided the rationale for conducting 23 semi-structured interviews with volunteer members of the discussion room object of analysis. Furthermore, I have tried to corroborate the interpretive scheme with additional observations carried out in and outside the discussion room.

The main suggestion emerging from the analytical work is that some of the elements that characterised the online discussions could be identified also in the interviews, but often they were used differently to favour a more proactive dimension of identity. This occurred because members of the discussion room were no longer recognising each other, but were interacting with the wider social context symbolised by the “outsider” role of the interviewer/ethnographer.

The new situation (the interviewer-respondent interaction) altered the process of identity construction, making it more explicit and directed towards an extra-linguistic dimension, a dimension where members did not just talk online but also “did” actual things, as they were keen to point out: they signed petitions, went to demonstrations, and so on. Although clearer, this interpretive scenario still needs to account for the role of computer mediated communication in the dynamics so far described. As the next chapter will show, the networked nature of the discourse taking place within the online discussion room presents specific challenges and offers some interesting suggestions.

7. The role of Computer-Mediated Communication

In this chapter I will explore the role of Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) in the dynamics discussed so far, drawing upon further analysis carried out on the asynchronous online discussions object of study in chapter 5.

The instances described and commented in this chapter were observed throughout the first empirical study and were initially recorded as interesting, somewhat peculiar examples of the type of networked discourse made possible by CMC. These were cases in which members of the online forum would engage in a discussion about a certain topic or issue, mentioning specific people in the posts, only for these same people to join the discussion at some point to provide their own views on that topic or issue, sometimes in a rather contentious and heated way. This phenomenon appeared relevant to the process of identity construction which was taking place in the discussion room, particularly in relation to the implicit and explicit emphasis members were putting on boundary negotiation and peripheral participation. It seemed that, amongst other things, the networked context was providing members of the discussion room with real opportunities and real people to “test” some of the elements of the common disciplinary identity being negotiated online. In the next section I will report four examples from the 20 online discussions analysed in the thesis, while later in the chapter I will interpret these examples drawing on the notions already explored in the thesis, in particular the concept of recognition work, in addition to other theoretical ideas.

7.1 Networked conversations

Example 1

The following heated exchange is a dialogue extracted from a discussion about statutory regulations for psychologists, namely those legally binding rules concerning different aspects of the profession, such as advertising. After 10 posts a participant sparks an

argument when, praising statutory regulations, he considers them as a necessity to keep the spreading of “bad” psychology under control:

Discussion's topic: Statutory regulations

Total posts: 26

Total participants: 12

Post 1

valevalens (female- graduate) A friend of mine tried to advertise her professional services, but I don't know if what she did was in line with statutory regulations. She left some leaflets in number of health centres (...) I have doubts about the legitimacy of this advertising system, does anyone have more info about this?

Post 10

HTSirri (Male – professional) From my point of view it's better to ask for an authorization, with a professional body that is outspoken against all the rubbish that is sold as “psychology”.

Here is an interesting bit from a regional president.

Quote:

We will carry on fighting anyway (...) but sometimes I have the feeling that I am trying to empty the sea with a tea-spoon, because besides counsellors there are many others who are trying to invade our field. There are the clinical pedagogues, the relational philosophers, the family mediators, the self claimed “psychoanalysts” with secondary school qualifications (if you have time to spare, have a look at Francesco X's website “European Association of Psychoanalysis, that we are trying to stop with some kind of legal action, but without success), psycho-astrologers and so on.

HTSirri draws on the already discussed cultural model according to which professions are separated fields of competence and expertise, each with precise criteria that determine who is “in”, and who is “out”. However, his post has an unexpected effect on the discussion: the relative popularity of OPSonline, and the fact that access to the discussion room is not restricted but open to everyone, allows the person mentioned in the quote (Francesco “X”: I have deliberately omitted his surname) to join the thread to express his own views on the matter:

Post 15

Francesco (Male – professional) Apparently HTsirri (...) lacks the basics as he ignores that the only real training to be a psychoanalyst comes from your own personal analysis. It is a path that demands a great investment, both economic AND psychological (...).

Last but not least, I wish to remind (...) that their legal action might actually damage me from a professional point of view, but I am proud to say that the Justice won at last clearing me completely. Therefore, it would be fair if everybody here knew that in Italy the profession of psychoanalyst is not regulated by the same laws that regulate psychologists and psychotherapists. Bringing to court psychoanalysts who are not aligned is just another form of medieval witch-hunting (...).

Using Gee's framework, it could be argued that the second poster's reply represents the introduction of a foreign discourse into the dialogue; he challenges the assumptions of a statutory regulated profession denying the legitimising role of official training, and eventually positions himself as the victim of a persecution that he likens to "medieval witch-hunting". The newcomer draws on the same cultural model, but he clearly articulates it differently by constructing psychoanalysis as a field that is independent from psychology; the main criterion of access to this alternative domain appears to be the "psychologically and economically expensive" personal therapy. Through his post "Francesco X" brings to the forefront an alternative identity: the "Psychoanalyst". It is worth reporting how the discussion evolved:

Post 16

HTSirri (Male, professional) The truth is that I am convinced that psychoanalysis is part of psychology (in the same way cognitivism is, or gestalt psychology, or transactional analysis, etc.), and as such it should abide by the law (...).

Then if you believe that through psychoanalysis you are not curing anyone, fair enough, I invite you to clearly state this to those who come to your office with a problem, telling them they should go to a psychotherapist if they really want to solve their problem, because the methods you use are not psychotherapy.

Post 17

Francesco (Male, professional) I just want to stress that the Italian law (...) clearly states that psychoanalysis and psychotherapy are two different things (...) psychoanalysis does not have to comply with any restrictions. One last thing, the analytic work's aim is to increase the level of self-awareness. With time (after a lot of resistance is overcome), this can lead to an effect of cure. On the other hand, if my primary aim was just curing, I would not know what I am actually doing. At least this is my view, and it was also the view of Freud and other great psychoanalysts.

Post 18

HT Sirri (male, professional) It may be the case that a psychoanalyst without any official titles does not need to comply with rules about advertising and promotion (precisely because psychoanalysis is not considered a profession). However, a psychotherapist psychoanalyst is an accredited professional and as such he should comply with statutory regulations. My point is that knowledge is good, and it should be spread as much as possible, but one thing is being fully aware of all possible knowledge in pharmacology, another thing is prescribing drugs without being a doctor. To put it bluntly: to put the emphasis on the analysis, in order to claim that the aim of the analytic relationship is not the cure, is just a rhetorical gimmick.

(...)

Does anybody want to be a psychoanalyst? I am glad he does, provided he follows a certain path, which should definitely include personal analysis and so forth, but also a degree in psychology.

The remaining exchanges between the two participants revolve around the problematic notion of cure, one of main themes underlying the construction of a common identity in the discussion room (see chapter 5 and 6). Psychotherapy is seen as “part” of psychology, and its legitimisation comes from the fact that psychologists, like doctors, can “cure” people. This “power”, however, can only be achieved through official training and formal qualifications. The “medical discourse” (“one thing is being fully aware of all possible knowledge in pharmacology, another thing is prescribing drugs without being a doctor”) is used ambiguously (like in the previous studies) to imply that, after all, psychologists are like doctors, and therefore their exclusive practices (psychotherapy) and their professional outputs (cure) should be protected accordingly. Due to their often controversial nature, these “conversations” can polarise the recognition work of identities, making even more acute the separation between “us and them”. While it is not entirely sure that this is always a positive thing, it is also likely that such dynamics help defining and strengthening people's identity and their sense of belonging to a specific community or, more widely, to a specific cultural field.

Example 2

Following is another interesting example. This time, the alternative identity that is brought into the dialogue is “being a mother”; the discussion begins when a member hints at the difficulties she is having with her own children, and explicitly asks how “women psychologists deal with being mothers”.

Discussion's topic: Mother and psychologist

Total posts: 7

Total participants: 5

Post 1

Rougealevres (female, graduate) It is so difficult to accept our own failures. When your children shout that you don't understand anything, when they break up with you... how do women psychologists deal with being mothers?

In the following posts other women explore the relationship between those two relevant dimensions of their actual, or possible, identities.

Post 2

Megghina (female professional) I don't think you should really see yourself as a failure just because your children shout that you don't understand anything... there is a phase when all children hate their parents, just to realise later on that they (their parents) weren't as bad as they thought...

And I think this has nothing to do with being a psychologist, this is only about being a mother.

Post 4

Chiagraz (female, professional) I am a mum with a two year old daughter and I am also a psychologist. I can assure you that being a mum makes me forget I am a

psychologist, and I find hard to apply to myself those things I have taught for years during seminars for parents. A child's development is a test for all parents, especially mothers.

Post 5

Castagna (female, professional) The important thing is not to lose sight of the fact that we are human beings, prone to mistakes, and that making a mistake is not a fault, regardless of the job you do (...) Furthermore being a professional psychologist doesn't mean you are flawless!!! We are humans in the first place!!! Great psychologists and psychoanalysts made the worst things: professional conflicts based on personal issues (see Freud and Jung... simplifying a bit), suicide (Bettelheim), dreadful relationships with their own children, multiple marriages, etc.

The other women stress the importance of keeping the two areas ("being a psychologist" and "being a mother") separated ("this has nothing to do with being a psychologist, this only about being a mother"), and challenge the stereotypical assumption according to which psychologists have a "higher level" of competence in relationship management ("being a professional psychologist doesn't mean you are flawless!!! We are humans in the first place!!!").

In the extract reported above the online "thread" turns into reflective space where the relationship between problematic or relevant aspects of different identities ("being a mother" and "being a psychologist") can be explored in a collaborative dialogue. The open, networked nature of a CMC context seems particularly suited to host such conversations and to facilitate exchange, mutual influencing, often conflict and controversy, between discourses and, therefore, between subjectivities.

Example 3

The same phenomenon described in the previous instances could be observed with various degrees of intensity in other discussions. In the following extract, a participant looks for information about pet therapy as a possible career path for psychologists. Another participant posts a list of charities and other organisations which deal, directly or indirectly, with pet therapy.

Discussion's topic: Pet Therapy

Total posts: 19

Total participants: 7

Viola1980 (female, student) Hi, I am still a student but I am already very interested in pet therapy as a possible career. Unfortunately I don't know much about it... does anybody know anything about courses, books, and websites about this topic? It would be interesting to talk to someone already experienced in the area... thanks!!!

Post 3

people (female, student) I've found this... and not knowing where you are from I am sending the whole list... I hope this will be useful

(...)

In Italy there are many centres studying the therapeutic effects of pets. However, this method is still not recognised, therefore this is not an official list:

(...)

The list (omitted here) reports several organisations, including contact names and addresses. Among the organisations there is also the "Italian Association for Pet Therapy". After a number of posts (10, to be precise) from other participants exploring the nature of pet therapy and the related professional opportunities, the contact person of the above-mentioned association suddenly joins the discussion.

Post 13

Deborah (female, professional) To all those interested in pet therapy, I am Deborah (....) from the Italian Association for Pet Therapy. I would like to give you some information about us and what we do (...), hope you will find this useful.

(...)

Post 14

Silviainardi (female, graduate) What Deborah says is very interesting, I would like her to tell us more about her experiences and how she managed to work in this field!

(...)

The exchange continues with the newcomer telling her professional story and answering questions. Again, a "representative" of a foreign practice has the opportunity to join a discussion where possible trajectories of professional identity are explored. A connection between two fields is established in the online context and this helps other participants to relate to the newcomer's experience.

Example 4

Following is one more example. In the extract, a simple information exchange between three members about a job offer becomes an exploration of the assumptions of different professional identities.

Discussion's topic: Urgent help request

Total posts: 8

Total participants: 3

Post 1

Giandany (female, graduate) hello everybody, does anyone have any useful information about the job advert published yesterday on this site about two posts as counsellors in Palermo? Who do I have to speak to as there was no contact detail?? The only thing I know is that it expires tomorrow, I have tried to send a message to whoever posted the advert, but I haven't had any reply yet.

Post 2

Antonio 76 (male, graduate) I don't know anything, I am also very interested as I live in Palermo, if you have got information please post it.

Post 3

Giandany (female, graduate) Scioppetta (another member – Ed) was great, she got me all the relevant information: You have to go to this website (...). I still haven't had time to check what it is about. I hope this helps. Good luck.

Post 4

Antonio76 (male, graduate) thanks for the information, but I have just noticed that one of the criteria is membership one of the psychotherapy bodies (it seems an exaggerated request to make to be honest!). I hope you'll get an interview. Good luck.

Post 5

Daniela (female, graduate) I agree, I also noticed they require qualifications for this post which seem really over the top. I don't think I'll be able to apply either :-@. This really annoys me, it seems to me they are trying once more to undermine psychology, suggesting that a psychologists lacks professional skills unless he becomes a psychotherapist. This is unfair, we psychology graduates certainly need to develop more practical skills through experience or more specific courses and masters; however we shouldn't be bullied into doing a psychotherapy school. What do you think?

Post 6

Antonio76 (male, graduate) I agree with what you say Daniela, in addition schools of psychotherapy cost mountains of money, and I just don't want to be again a burden for my parents (although they have said many times they would be willing to help me). I think I'll do it only when I have some kind of income. Anyway it seems to me that nowadays a psychologist can only work within little local council projects which last less than a semester and you don't see any money for months.

In hospitals they only ask for volunteers.

In the north there is more demand for psychologists as HR experts in companies, however before migrating I want to take my chances in Palermo.

Are you a graduate, do you work?

Post 7

Giandany, (female, graduate) hi Antonio, we are on the same wavelength on this matter. As for me, I am doing a master and I am quite happy. Masters last less and give you more skills to get into the profession. I graduated two years ago, I signed up to the professional bodies of psychology a few months ago and soon I'll soon activate myself about a couple of things I got on my mind.

Furthermore, although I have completed my internship almost six months ago, I keep volunteering at the hospital to make more experience under the supervision of more experienced colleagues. I am optimistic about the future, although I know it will take time. Just don't put all your expectations on projects funded by local councils, the real chances are in the free profession. Do a good master degree in some field of psychology that interests you, and that will give you something relevant you don't have already. Then you'll begin to make some sense of this degree. Keep in touch.

Take care, Daniela.

In the above extract, the online medium becomes once more the point of intersection of life experiences, narratives and professional trajectories, affording the opportunity to emphasise the perceived "injustices" and reaffirming the recognition of psychology in terms of professional value. We can see the dialogic exchanges taking place in extract as a meaningful activity through which connections between ideas, groups and alternative identities can be established. Such an activity requires further research efforts in order to be properly understood and, if possible, supported.

7.2 Discussion

The examples described in this chapter were observed “serendipitously” during the first empirical study, and were captured as interesting examples of how computer-mediated communication is actively used to create a specific type of networked discourse. What I found in the examples was a pattern by which members of the online discussion room would engage in a discussion about a certain theme, often mentioning specific people or categories of people, only for these people to join the discussion, bringing alternative views and sometimes making contentious points which would enhance the “dialectic” quality of the discourse. In this section, I will attempt to interpret such finding drawing on the theoretical notions already used the thesis, as well as additional theoretical tools derived from the literature on social studies and semiotics, starting once again from the work of James Gee, who suggests that:

“the Discourses we enact existed before each of us came unto the scene and most of them will exist long after we have left the scene. Discourses, through our words and deeds, carry on conversations with each other through history, and in doing so, form human history.”(Gee, 1999, p. 19).

In other words, according to Gee the discursive resources used to sustain and legitimate our identities are not only situated and specific; in fact, they also belong to other Discourses and are used within other institutions. Such Discourses “talk” to each other, through what Gee calls “C-conversations”, shaping and influencing each other and, eventually, influencing how people recognise themselves and are recognised by others as individuals or groups.

Gee stresses that identity is never a mono-dimensional phenomenon, but it always draws on other discursive resources and other identities in a continuous “intertextual” process of mutual exchange and dialogue. The term “intertextuality” was coined by Kristeva (1968, 1980), who reinterpreted Bakhtin’s influential work (1986) in order to describe the dialogic and cultural processes that at any time affect our lives and our relationships with others. The potential of intertextuality as a pedagogical notion was also noted by Scardamalia and Bereiter (2003) in their popular knowledge-building model:

“Knowledge advancement is fundamentally a socio-cultural process, enhanced by cultures of innovation. Bakhtin (1986) uses the term “*intertextuality*” to indicate how the voices of others are

integrated into what we think, write, and say. "Standing on the shoulders of giants" is a rough approximation" (Scardamalia & Bereiter, 2003, p. 3).

Intertextuality is a notion that is potentially capable of reconciling social semiosis and cognitivism, because it assumes that the dialogic processes of meaning-making, which take place within a relationship involving individual, groups and society as a whole, provide us with an ever-changing repertoire of culturally informed texts, ideas, constructs and discourses. This repertoire influences, more than anything else, how we communicate, think and how we define our personal and social identities. Therefore, a pedagogy that tries to encourage identity-work, as much as knowledge-construction, should focus on educational strategies that aim to increase the intertextual quality of our creative thought processes on the one side, as in Bereiter and Scardamalia' model, and of our social and cultural relationships on the other.

The phenomena described in this chapter could represent interesting examples of how intertextuality manifests itself in a networked environment. In all of the examples, CMC provided the means to establish meaningful connections with different cultural fields and with the subjectivities that operate in them. After they were observed in the online discussions, the instances reported above seemed to offer some support to a key assumption of intertextuality (Marshall, 1992), according to which the discourses within a particular situated context, like an online discussion forum, do not exist in a discursive vacuum. According to Marshall (1992), intertextuality refers to a system of interrelationships between socio-cultural and historical factors that come together in specific moment within a text. As she puts it:

"Intertextuality calls attention to prior texts in the sense that it acknowledges that no text can have meaning without those prior texts, it is a space where "meanings" intersect. There is no such thing as the autonomous text (or work)" (Marshall, 1992, p. 128).

The main point here is that identities, like texts, are situated at the intersection where other identities meet. The examples reported in the previous section suggest that CMC allows people to engage in an intertextual experience in which meaning is constructed and negotiated by accessing multiple worldviews and semiotic resources: alternative views on disciplinary identity (being a psychotherapist as opposed to being a psychologist), and alternative views on personal identity (being a mother as opposed to being a psychologist). The interesting point seems to be that such alternative subjectivities are not fictitious and not too "fluid" either, like early research on online identity would

suggest, they are very real and very much grounded in real and personal contexts of life. Rather than a virtual space, the internet seems in this case to be more like a “way station”, where different meanings intersect and where several directions could lead to different, very real places.

Due to its specific features, computer-mediated communication may well become a powerful tool at the service of an intertextual pedagogy (see also Voithofer, 2006), because it can facilitate the coordination and the interconnection of the different aspects that constitute ideas, discourses and identities, helping the articulation of C-conversations between them.

These features, which have been identified in many studies (Hara, Bonk & Angeli, 2000; Hawkes & Romiszowsky, 2001; McIntyre & Tlusty, 1995), include:

- extended time spans that increase the opportunities for “deep” thinking;
- the possibility to hide or disguise identities in order to minimize shyness, risks of expressing controversial opinions and embarrassment;
- sensible and supporting moderation and control, which can facilitate interactions discouraging the more negative side effects such as aggressive or abusive language (“flaming”).

Summary

In this chapter I have explored aspects left in the background in the empirical study described earlier in the thesis. These aspects pertain to the role of computer-mediated communication and offer an additional insight into the process of identity construction taking place within the online discussion room. The chapter’s main argument is based on further analysis carried out on the asynchronous online discussions, which constituted the main corpus of data in the first empirical study (see chapter 5). During the first empirical studies, some instances were recorded in which the nature of CMC allowed participants to access alternative views about disciplinary and personal identity, often through the voices of specific individuals. In these instances, the online context appeared to become a space where different subjectivities and different types of recognitions were intersecting and influencing each other. This chapter, which should be seen as a corollary to the empirical section of the thesis rather than an independent study, used the concepts of C-Conversion (Gee, 1999) and Intertextuality (Bakhtin, 1986; Kristeva, 1980), to suggest that online interactions facilitate the active negotiation and the mutual influencing between alternative Discourses and, therefore, between alternative identities.

8. Discussion and conclusions

This thesis has explored a fairly specific research question: is the construction of a common identity taking place in an online collaborative environment? This question has been tackled by analysing the relationship between discourse, learning and identity in a networked context. More specifically, an empirical study has been carried out in a “discussion room” within an Italian-speaking online forum of young psychologists and psychology students. The study suggested that the members of the discussion room were mutually engaged in the definition of a common identity as “young psychologists”. Before considering the theoretical and practical implications of the findings, it could prove useful to the reader to briefly summarise the main assumptions underlying the research project.

From a theoretical perspective, the thesis draws on the socio-cultural perspective according to which collaborative learning takes place in specific contexts of agency, also called “communities of practice” (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). In these contexts, individuals define their competence through increasing levels of membership, developing common identities in the process. The notion of community of practice (CoP) has influenced a great deal of research, but the crucial process of identity construction has not always been consistently investigated. More specifically, this thesis argues that there is a substantial lack of clarity in the way the relationship between identity, practice and discourse is conceptualised in the CoP model.

This criticism represents the theoretical basis that justifies the empirical work undertaken in the thesis. Starting from the assumption that the development of a common identity is often considered as the driving force behind participation in a community of practice, I have tried to understand whether this is actually occurring in a specific online context, using a methodology based on James Gee’s approach to discourse analysis (1998, 1999). This approach focuses on the situated meanings and cultural models which are employed during interactions (see chap. 3). Situated meanings refer to the specific situation (what is going on, who are the agents and how they represent themselves, what assumptions are shared, and so on), while cultural models frame that particular situation in a given moment in history. The interaction between situated meanings and cultural

models allows the emergence of discourses, which represent complex ways to “pull off” an identity. People use discourses to recognise themselves and be recognised in a certain way, through what Gee calls “recognition work”. In this chapter, I will explore the contributions of the thesis to the research on networked learning environment.

8.1 Implications and contributions to theory

8.1.1 Is the context analysed in this thesis a community of practice?

This thesis contributes mainly to the view according to which learning is closely related to the development of an identity (Gee, 2005; Packer & Goicoechea, 2000; Swales, 2004).

Furthermore, the empirical section of the thesis supports the notion that online environments offer unique affordances for reflection (Ayas & Zeniuk, 2001; Luehmann, 2008) and that computer-mediated communication can be a powerful tool in the process of identity construction (see chapter 2 for a review of the studies that also explored this aspect). I believe these suggestions are consistent with the notion of technological affordances for intersubjective learning (Suthers, 2005) according to which learning, with or without the support provided by computers and digital technologies, is not only accomplished through the interactions of the participants, but also consists of those interactions (Koschmann et al, 2005). According to Suthers (2005), the notion of intersubjective learning implies metaphors and models that influence the way we think about information technologies, seeing them sometimes as communication channels, sometimes as critical forums, sometimes as supporting tutors. The findings of this thesis contribute to the field of research that investigates online learning by suggesting that networked environments are also spaces where identities are constructed, and this represents in itself a specific form of socio-cultural learning. I am not referring to the personal dimensions of identity (like gender, race, class, relationships), these aspects are important but constitute a background in the context of this thesis which focuses instead on the social dimensions of identity and, in particular, on those aspects emerging from participation and membership in professional and disciplinary contexts.

However, during the empirical study it became gradually clear that many of the available descriptive categories in the field of online learning were problematic: community, online community, online community of practice and so on. Through my participant observation I have observed “first hand” the theoretical vagueness often mentioned in the literature (see, in particular, chapter 1 and 3 in this thesis). The CoP framework does offer fascinating ideas and a sophisticated terminology, such as the way through which it conceptualises the dynamics of peripheral participation, and obviously the emphasis on

engagement in social practice. However, I came across these aspects in unexpected and sometimes contradictory ways, to the point that I had to look elsewhere in order to find theoretical and methodological tools to make sense of the data and explore the research question.

To begin with, I found very problematic to apply the definition of community of practice to the online environment I was investigating (OPSONline, and the discussion room where the actual analyses were carried out). As already noted in the description provided in chapter 4, OPSONline has thousands of registered members (more than 10.000 in September 2007) who mostly (but not only) interact in the 38 asynchronous discussion rooms which constitute the forum. Since the early ethnographic/observational stage, it became apparent that this was not a homogenous context but rather an aggregate, a network of groups, each operating in a specific shared context of meaning, with different objectives and priorities. These groups, which were based on the different participation patterns within the forum (the different rooms, or even the different threads within specific rooms), were fluid and shifting and many members participated, with varying levels of engagement and membership, in several groups at the same time. Members could move freely from one discussion room to another reading messages and posting new ones whenever they wanted.

However, the forum's administration panel unearthed some regularities in the participation patterns, with some members tending to post more in certain rooms rather than others, leading to the constitution of relatively stable and uniformed groups. For example, the discussion room "on the psychological profession" (where the empirical study was carried out) attracted more graduates and young professionals than students (see chapter 4). Furthermore, the different online groups were not self-contained, but entangled in a complex "web" of mutually influencing relationships with the real-life dimension. Some of these relationships were fairly linear like, for example, when a specific psychology course in a university was directly related to a discussion room within the forum. Others were mainly based on abstract and "imagined" factors (Anderson, 1991), like the discussion room for clinical psychologists, related to an undefined sub-group of professionals who, nonetheless, constituted another "community" within the larger professional universe of professional psychology.

Similarly, the discussion room "on the psychological professions" was a symbolic space in which the relationship with other forms of participation in several other contexts of professional practice could be explored in an engaged dialogue. Different trajectories of identity, both actual and potential, converged in the discourse enacted in the discussion room, activating the transformative process that Gee calls "recognition work", and

resulting in the construction of a common identity (a common trajectory). This identity was specific and situated, but at the same time it was linked to external social contexts through the resources made available by the human and technological network.

In this respect, the notion of peripheral participation appears to be critical. The empirical study suggested that participants in the discussion room tended to construct themselves as peripheral to the actual psychological professional practices, either because they were recently graduated, or more often because they felt that access to such practices was blocked or compromised by several factors. The point I wish to focus on here is that participants were not peripheral in relation to the discussion room, nor they were peripheral in relation to the wider online community. Their marginal nature can only be understood as related to the vaguely defined context of “professional psychology”, which can hardly be described as a community of practice, but resembles more a loosely connected network of groups and interests, or a network of affinity spaces (Gee, 2005).

8.1.2 Networked affinity spaces

As already suggested in chapter 2, the idea of community carries connotations of close-knit personal ties which do not reflect the actual relationships that characterise online networks. This thesis provides additional empirical backing to this claim, suggesting alongside Gee (2005) that we should focus on the many possible ways of being a member within and across networked semiotic spaces, which are defined by the varying degrees of affinity and participation expressed by individuals in several interconnected contexts. In such contexts, learning becomes intertwined with identity and, more specifically, with the capacity to define a consistent recognition that can legitimise participation in the wider cultural field that encompasses the network of affinity spaces.

At the same time, I have tried in this thesis to articulate the suggestion that the discursive construction of an identity is the common element that allows individuals to participate within and across the interconnected network of affinity spaces. This process can take unusual and unexpected turns, but it is also a powerful stimulus to define a more positive and committed type of engagement.

For example, the “young psychologists’ identity” that emerged from the discussion room can be understood as a trajectory of participation which does not follow a linear route within a well-defined community. This trajectory does not go from the periphery to the centre, instead it remains at the margins of the professional network mentioned above, but at the same time it turns its peripherality into a stimulus for agency and change. A crucial implication follows: participation dynamics are certainly local manifestations which occur

in specific “communities”, but to be properly understood they should be related to wider contexts and networks in which those communities are embedded. Unfortunately, the CoP model does not provide the theoretical and methodological tools to acknowledge and study these problematic aspects, due to an inherent difficulty to go beyond the dimension of non-discursive agency. To make things clearer we could probably think in terms of two different, but very much related, analytic levels. On the one hand, there is the specific discussion room, seen as a situated context in itself, and on the other, there is the relationship with the larger network of professional psychology.

The suggestion I wish to make in this thesis is that these two analytic levels can be seen as simultaneously present only through the lens of discourse, a transformative practice that brings together in a symbolic space identities, activities and language. This suggestion is similar to Lemke’s (1997) invitation to consider not only the “self-referential” dimension of collaborative social contexts, i.e. the contextual and specific side of the activities/practices that take place in them, but also the fact that, in most cases, such contexts are part of a complex network of relations, interconnections, symbolic references with other communities, with values and ideologies and with the wider culture (what he calls “eco-social” systems). The focus of this thesis on networked discourse, seen as a socio-cultural activity, has shown that participation in a single collaborative situation is not sufficient to explain the different trajectories of membership within which our identity can be projected.

8.1.3 Theoretical integration

In this paragraph, I will describe the specific areas of research on networked learning to which this thesis attempts to contribute. In the first place, additional ideas to address the issues described in the previous paragraph can be derived from Wenger’s own work (Wenger, 2006), in particular from those parts where he acknowledged that using his theory in today’s world will inevitably require some extensions, such as more emphasis on multiple communities, which he also defined as “multi-scale social learning systems, involving complex constellations of practices, communities, networks, and institutions at multiple levels of scale”. (Wenger, 2006, p. 4). In such contexts, identity will be again a trajectory, but one which will involve participation in a multiplicity of contexts, and learning will be involved in the process of managing these multiple forms of participation over time in order to find some sort of balance between fragmentation and coherence.

Another interesting, emerging theoretical view is the one defined as “networked learning” (see Steeples & Jones, 2002), which is based on an interdisciplinary approach to learning

and interaction through the use of ICT. This framework draws on a number of theoretical ideas which include communities of practices but also collaborative problem-solving (Dillenbourg, 1999), and constructivism (Morrisons & Collins, 1996). It represents an original attempt to go beyond some of the limitations of the CoP model. A basic assumption of networked learning is that weak ties (Granovetter, 1973) favour interconnectedness between individuals, groups and resources, leading to the creation of symbolic spaces that transcend topology and proximity. In such spaces, unstable, loose and variable relationships are not “symptoms” of inadequate membership and lack of engagement, but support specific forms of collaboration and learning.

Compared to the idea of “community”, which emphasises cohesive properties, the network metaphor privileges instead fluid and variable relationships. Perhaps this metaphor is more appropriate to the nature of contemporary society, described by Castells (2001) in terms of “networked individualism”, rather than in terms of closely knit communities sharing common histories and strong ties. Networks can therefore be described as distributed spaces that do not rely on cohesion, although cohesion can indeed occur between specific nodes of a network. Networks are processes, dynamic relationships where information and resources flow between nodes, and where the connections between the nodes gradually lead to the emergence of organised structures and power relations.

A fairly similar perspective is represented by the notion of network of practices (Brown & Duguid, 2001; Duguid, 2005). Brown and Duguid argued that research on communities of practice has overemphasised the importance of community, neglecting the most important half of the equation: practice. They also noted that the CoP notion, along with the related idea of “tacit” knowledge (informal and inherently practical knowledge developed through participation rather than acquired through formal training), have been deployed with a fair amount of “mysticism” (Duguid, 2005, p.109). Nonetheless, they suggested that practice does maintain analytical usefulness, raising important issues that are left unaccounted for by other theoretical frameworks.

Practice, they argued, creates its own peculiar topography of knowledge and identity, which usually goes beyond the local dimension of a specific community and resembles more a loosely connected network. In fact, in most cases, practice is shared across boundaries by practitioners who will never come into contact with one another: a CEO and a technician in the same company have very little in common, and they are likely to identify more with peers in other organisations than with many of their co-workers. As an example, Brown and Duguid cited Knorr-Cetina’s ethnographic study on high-energy physicists (1999). In her study, Knorr-Cetina analysed how shared experimental and

academic practices determine the flow of knowledge across boundaries, leading to the creation of “epistemic cultures”, where geographically dispersed individuals feel connected to each other because they are engaged in similar endeavours.

Networks of practice seem particularly suited to describe large professional and academic groups (like psychologists), defining “maps” of knowledge and identity development. However, this framework still does not provide a detailed account of the aspects that can constitute a barrier to participation and learning in a network. After all, people still join networks through local communities, as Duguid also noted:

“You become an economist by entering an economics department in Chicago, or Berkeley, or Columbia—a route that may mark you for life, in part because the tacit knowledge of the local community profoundly shapes your identity and its trajectory” (Duguid, 2005, p.113).

But what happens if access is impaired? This possibility opens up another scenario where, alongside practice, we have to take into account how people deal with the “lack” of practice, for instance when they have been trained to become part of an epistemic culture, or a network, but they perceive themselves as cut out and left at the margins. The study carried out in this thesis does provide some insights into this scenario, showing how a group of young psychologists, who felt that their own trajectory of participation was compromised, used computer-mediated discourse to define an “alternative” network, attempting to claim back the knowledge and the identity which they felt entitled to, and trying to find their own voice. The next section will explore in further detail the implications of such “unexpected” scenarios, suggesting that a focus on discourse can help us identify the multiple, non-linear strategies through which people try to find their voices in networks.

Constellations of practice, multi-scale learning systems and networks of affinity spaces are useful notions that can help us overcome some of the limitations of the CoP model. However, there is one aspect that, if brought to the fore, could enrich even further our understanding of participation and learning in today’s “interconnected” world. This aspect is the relationship between identity and discourse which, as this thesis suggests, represents a vantage point from which multiple trajectories and forms of participation can be empirically observed and analysed. This raises the question of what theoretical model of identity is better suited to the peculiar nature of networks. Some answers can be attempted.

One possibility is “positioning theory” (Harré & Langenhove, 1991), which has already

been used to analyse the fluctuating and variable nature of so called “cyber-identities” in online collaborative environments (Talamo & Ligorio, 2001). The positioning theory assumes that participants in an interactive context can strategically “shift” from one position to another depending on what features are more relevant and effective in every specific situation. Doing so, they actively construct different identities and use them as resources, conferring relevance and strength to their argumentations. According to the positioning theory, we keep shifting positions within the same interaction, and the “person” is only “a position that locates an act within a universe of possible locations defined by discourse” (Holland et al., 1998 p. 44).

A possible alternative to this fairly radical social constructionist view of identity is offered by Bakhtin’s theory (1981, 1986), according to which people engage in a dialogic activity of “self authoring”, willingly seeking historical consistence and narrative continuity in their existences. Bakhtin’s ideas have been used (see Holland et al., 1998) to suggest that people discover their own “voice” reasserting a point of control over their socially constructed identities. Mann (2003), showed how non-positional aspects of identity, which pertain to more stable dimensions like age and personal history, can have a big influence on the process of participation in a network. Her personal reflection on a problematic and difficult experience in a networked environment hinted precisely at the difficulty of finding a “voice”, a voice that needs to be integrated with pre-existing trajectories and narratives of becoming; or, perhaps, a voice that allows to partially reconsider those narratives, in order to reinterpret the most counterproductive aspects that can undermine an active and fruitful engagement (see Mann, 2003). Finally, there is James Gee, whose notion of recognition work has been extensively explored in this thesis where it was applied to the study of a networked context. According to this notion, language, activities, ways of interacting, feelings and so on, work together to make visible and recognisable our “way of being in the world”.

Perhaps these perspectives on identity could equally contribute to a unified framework through which we could simultaneously account for the complex dynamics that take place in networks. Such integration could be explored through a systematic empirical process, analysing how identities are negotiated and constructed in order to derive indications as to how we can in the first place understand, and then actively scaffold the process of recognition work and/or finding a “voice” in a network.

8.1.4 More about Gee's model and its relationship with wider scholarship on identity and learning

Large part of chapter 2 was concerned with theories of identity formation and disciplinary membership in "real" settings and virtual environments. The chapter highlighted Renninger and Shumar's (2002; 2004) suggestion that online communities are based on symbolic boundaries that regulate unconventional types of attachment and belonging: exploring how such boundaries are defined and negotiated allows, from an analytic point of view, to understand the forms of connection experienced by social agents in a particular field, and their motivation to learn and participate as active and productive members.

The main point of the chapter was that online contexts should be seen as parts of wider cultural fields, which also include other interconnected online and offline contexts of practice. These cultural fields are characterised by a particular type of structure, the "rhizome" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987), which is based on diversity, separation of parts and non-linear organisation. Such a complex model can help us understand virtual communities as based on several non-linear connections with many other overlapping subgroups, subcultures and with the wider cultures they belong to. The chapter also suggested that such configurations can be conceptualised as networks of affinity spaces (Gee, 2005), which are defined by the varying degrees of affinity and participation expressed by individuals in several interconnected, online and offline contexts. In such spaces, people relate to each other primarily in terms of common interests, goals and practices, and their "membership" cannot be pinned down as it is distributed across the network. At the same time the chapter, consistent with Bourdieu's notion of habitus (1977, 1980), argued that the formation of a relatively durable set of dispositions - a sense of identity - allows people to participate and learn within the interconnected network of affinity spaces.

In this thesis, I suggest that Gee's methodology allows us to observe such dynamics through an ethnographic and discursive approach. However, it is important to consider this statement under a more critical light by locating Gee's framework in the wider landscape of current scholarship on identity development and its relationship to discourse. Oversimplifying to a degree, it could be argued that such landscape is based on a fundamental distinction, between theories which tend to emphasise the power that structural and sociohistorical factors have in imposing particular types of identities (e.g. Bowles & Gintis, 1976), and others which focus on people's the ability to construct identities situated in specific contexts of discourse and practice, in ever-changing, fluid and sometimes unpredictable manners (e.g. Gergen, 1993). Gee's own theoretical proposal clearly tries to compromise between these sometimes starkly opposed views. As already noted in chapter 2 and elsewhere in the thesis, this compromise is attempted by

conflating “situated meanings” and “cultural models” in a single notion which he calls “recognition work”. Gee resolves the above mentioned dichotomy by suggesting that situated meanings and cultural models are two interdependent aspects: the specific situation (what is going on, who are the actors, and so forth), and the cultural dimension that frames that particular situation in a given moment in history. Situated meanings and cultural models include language plus other aspects (actions, interactions, ways of thinking, dressing, believing, cultural values, historical assumptions and so on), and they interact together to create identities. Such identities are mostly based on a conscious effort to “pull off” a certain way of being in the world. In other words, people use situated meanings and cultural models to be “recognised” in a certain way.

As for the idea of “recognition”, its spiritual origins as a developmental and ontological driving force can arguably be traced in the philosophy of Hegel (1807/1977) and, in particular, in his idea of “bildung”. This term generally refers to education, but it has a much deeper meaning which also includes “cultivation” and “formation”. For instance, the “Bildungsroman” was a popular literary genre in the eighteenth century, in which the protagonist acquires knowledge and self-awareness through a series of testing life experiences. According to Hegelian ontology, the condition for the possibility of self-consciousness is a relationship of mutual “recognition” (Anerkennung) between agents. Such mutual recognition underlies the notion of bildung and contributes to define it as a dialectical and historical formative process, through which consciousness becomes aware of itself. Developing a sense of self and agency, the Hegelian self comes to define itself as a “Spirit”, through the realisation that it is inseparably related to a community of other selves.

The origins of the notion of recognition seem to support Luke’s (2002) suggestion that Gee has developed a rather “eclectic” theoretical toolkit, which comes at the price of being less concerned with the lexico-syntactic features of the text and more focused on rather general cultural and situational resources of meaning making. On the one hand, it could be rightfully argued that this amplifies the risk of vagueness; on the upside, this allows Gee’s model to move beyond approaches that concentrate on how ideology is reproduced in specific features of text (as in Fairclough, 1992, or van Dijk, 1993), a worthwhile exercise but one which would go beyond the scope of this thesis, to redirect attention on the socio-cultural work of identity as a process of socio-cultural learning and development.

It is important to acknowledge, at this point, the theoretical and empirical difficulty of distinguishing between various forms of identity such as gender identity, cultural identity, regional identity, national identity and so on. After all, the notion of identity is naturally associated with specificity, even uniqueness and this raises the question of the extent to

which all these “types” of identity can be compared and related to each other. Gee’s model represents only one possible course of action, one which addresses this difficulty by conceptualising “identity” as one of the multiple layers of the process of mutual recognition, and by moving away from the cognitive, motivational and emotional aspects involved in the definition of a common identity, and on towards how such identity is actively constructed in discourse to accomplish particular goals, as a form of mediated activity. It is a specific, if limited, focus, but a necessary choice in this thesis considering the constraints of an individual PhD research project. These points have influenced the empirical section of this thesis based on the study of an online community of psychologists.

In particular, the empirical chapters have used Gee’s notion of recognition work (1999) as an interpretive tool for studying how identities are “pulled off” across three dialogic, culturally defined and networked contexts of discursive practice: in an online forum, during online interviews, and in some particularly relevant events occurred in “real life”. On the basis of ethnographic and discursive evidence, I wish to argue here that the notion of recognition work can be very useful to understand important aspects of socio-cultural learning and, in particular, that recognition work represents the observable process of defining a habitus (Bourdieu, 1977), or some of the elements that constitute a habitus. The specific function of computer-mediated communication in such process is that of encouraging “intertextual” connections and participation (see chapter 7), leading to the production of specific discursive practices that can be consistently articulated across a network.

8.2 Some considerations about the “design” and the support of networked learning environments

The motivational aspects of participation in a networked learning environment, what actually brings people to share knowledge and engage in a meaningful discourse, are still not completely understood. Some authors (Kim, 2000; Preece, 2001) already emphasised the social and relational dimensions of online interactions (sociability), which require an adequate level of attention during the design phase, as well as the social needs upon which a virtual community can be developed. Other authors (Kollock, 1999) redefined the dynamics of uninterested exchange on the web in terms of “economy of reciprocity”,

which is based on a distributed network of positive expectations which underpin participation and collaboration.

However, the study carried out in this thesis suggests that the nature of networked participation needs to be conceptualised in a more problematic manner, because there are pre-existing elements and situational factors that influence it and motivate it in a dramatic way. Hence I think it is possible to add another factor to the scenario sketched above: the capacity of a networked environment to be a symbolic space in which to explore reflexively the problematic dimensions of our trajectories of participation, and our socially constructed identities, in other forms of social interaction. From such a perspective, the "design" of networked learning should include the analysis of the dilemmatic, even controversial, dimensions (Billig, 1991) that characterise our learning trajectories. Such dimensions support and encourage the dialogic and rich interaction of everyday life and can be further scaffolded by the reflective nature of asynchronous CMC. This "design strategy" (quotation marks are obligatory) would take advantage of the principle according to which "the indeterminacy of lived ideologies makes them wonderfully rich and flexible resources for social interaction and every-day sense making" (Edley, 2001 p. 203).

The online discussions analysed in chapter 6 are good examples of this dense "sense making". In particular, I wish to re-draw attention to the one entitled "mother and psychologist". This discussion begins when a member mentions the difficulties she is having with her children. During the discussion, five women draw on two different Discourses (as in Gee's distinction between Discourse, about identity, and discourse, about language) creating a "polyphonic" (Bakhtin, 1984) interaction through which an apparently commonsensical conversation takes place. Through this polyphony two identity trajectories are explored and interconnected. The first Discourse, which could be defined as "motherhood", presents specific ways of describing and recognising gender relations, defining women's role and their expected "competence" with children. The second discourse is that of the psychologist as an "expert" in social relationships; someone who, by education and inclination, is in a vantage position to understand sensitive matters, not only from a strictly professional point of view, but also from a "human" and personal one. Therefore the question kick-starting the discussion: "how do women psychologists deal with being mothers?"

This process of interconnection between different discourses and identities has been explored in chapter 6 as an example of how networked communication facilitates, or better, provides the technological "affordances", for intertextual (Bakhtin, 1986; Kristeva, 1980) relationships. The chapter ended with the suggestion that the notion of

intertextuality could represent the bridge between social semiosis and knowledge creation, due to its emphasis on the idea that an ever-changing repertoire of culturally informed texts, ideas, constructs and discourses provide us with the resources to communicate, think and define our personal and social identities . The way networked communication can achieve this is by allowing a community or a subcommunity to “talk” to other communities and sub communities developing what Bakhtin defines as the “heteroglossia” of a community’s language use (Bakhtin, 1981). Heteroglossia (from the Greek words *hetero*: other, and *glōssa*: tongue) refers to the capacity to understand and speak other social languages, and therefore it can be directly related to the development of self and mutual awareness. This awareness constitutes the background against which social relations and identities are constructed and enacted.

The occurrence of intertextual discussions in the context I have analysed was absolutely spontaneous, most certainly the result of a combination of situational and culturally specific factors. The ensuing question is: is it possible to re-create these types of interactions and actively support them? Unfortunately, I cannot give a straight answer to such question, but I strongly believe that it represents an opportunity and a challenge worth undertaking. Having said that, I also feel compelled to raise serious doubts as to whether it is possible to “design” dilemmatic situations in which people spontaneously engage in recognition work as such.

In line with the points made above, I could perhaps articulate some more specific suggestions for the facilitation of online networked environments where identity work is an important dimension of learning. In the first place, the process of nurturing such environments should begin with a careful analysis of the socio-cultural aspects involved (see also Gray & Tatar, 2004 for similar suggestions), focusing in particular on the commonalities between identities and trajectories of participation within cultural fields (Bourdieu, 1988). However, I believe that instead to focus on design and facilitation “per se”, we probably need to re-think the ways through which we define and evaluate our strategies and assumptions, beginning from the concept of design itself. In fact, we should probably give up altogether the idea that social networks, where people actively engage in reflection, intertextuality, knowledge building and so on, can be ‘designed’ through some sort of engineered process (see also Schlager & Fusco, 2004 for a critical discussion about the notion of design). We need new criteria that can inform how we conceive the potential of networking technologies. A ‘reality check’ is necessary in order to see how multidimensional, and downright problematic, human-computer interaction really is; how it is grounded in history, society and in the ‘forms of life’ shared and enacted by people on a day to day basis. We need to re-introduce in our pedagogies ontological and historical criteria alongside epistemological ones because, as it has been often stressed in this

thesis, learning is not just a matter of epistemology (how knowledge is created), but also one of ontology (how persons are created). Therefore, more efforts should be devoted to understanding, creating and supporting networks, where individuals and groups can develop positive identities as workers and professionals, through a critical understanding of their social and historical worlds.

8.3 Issues and limitations of the empirical study

8.3.1 The credibility issue

It is perhaps unnecessary to remind the reader of the methodological debate that has been raging for the last 4 decades about the lack of objectivity of qualitative inquiry and its inherent limitations when compared to quantitative methods. There is a vast literature that covers every possible aspect of the controversy and how it can be overcome (see Bryman, 2001; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Silverman, 2001). In this debate, a useful position is the one adopted by the likes of Patton (1990), who noted that ideals of absolute objectivity and value-free science are impossible to attain, and not particularly desirable in the first place, because they tend to ignore the social nature and the human purposes of every form of inquiry. As a solution, Patton chose to be a pragmatist, avoiding using ideologically charged words such as “objective” and “subjective”, and suggesting that any research strategy ultimately needs credibility to be useful:

“There are not ways of perfectly replicating the researcher’s analytical thought processes. There are no straightforward tests for reliability and validity. In short there are no absolute rules except to do the very best with your full intellect to fairly represent the data and communicate what the data reveal given the purpose of the study” (Patton, 1990, p. 373).

According to Silverman (2001), one way to increase the credibility of qualitative research is through a “critical” use of triangulation. As already mentioned in chapter 6, there are basically four kinds of triangulation that contribute to add credibility to qualitative inquiry:

i. Methods triangulation, which is usually concerned with comparing data collected through qualitative methods with data collected through quantitative methods. However, Patton (1990) noted that this process is far from being straightforward, as there are often dramatic differences in the assumptions behind a qualitative and a quantitative research

method, to the point that the two are likely to answer different questions that cannot be brought together within a consistent interpretive framework.

ii. Triangulation through multiple analysts. This strategy helps reducing the 'bias' deriving from one single researcher doing data collection, analysis and interpretation. As far as this doctoral thesis is concerned, the main problem with this type of triangulation was purely practical, as it was problematic, to say the least, to involve other researchers at any stage of the empirical studies.

iii. Theory triangulation, which is based on the use of different theoretical perspectives to interpret the same corpus of data. Obviously there are many possible ways to look at phenomena, and taking into account different frameworks can potentially add depth and complexity to the researcher's understandings.

iv. Finally, there is the triangulation of qualitative data sources, which is the one used in this thesis. This strategy is based on checking the consistency of the interpretation across different sources analysed with the same qualitative method. However, data triangulation has issues as well, because it is very likely that different types of data will capture different aspects of the phenomena analysed, potentially leading to opposing rather than complementary interpretations. In this respect, Fielding and Fielding (1986) criticised Denzin's suggestion that the practice of triangulation could be used to overcome partial views and achieve a more complete picture. In particular, they noted that Denzin's claims about triangulation ignore that actions and accounts are 'situated' in specific contexts of discourse and practice, and argued that neglecting this fundamental quality of social phenomena may lead to a naively optimistic view, according to which the aggregation of different types of data allows to reach some kind of phenomenological "truth".

However, Silverman (2001) also acknowledged that qualitative researchers should not give up altogether triangulating data from multiple sources, provided they are critically aware of the situated character of social phenomena. In fact, Silverman suggested that focusing on the specific, contextual nature of situated data can be an opportunity to unearth interesting, sometimes unexpected relationships and implications.

This brings us directly to the way triangulation has been used in this thesis. The analytic separation between situated meanings and cultural models at the core of James Gee's methodological framework can be seen as an attempt to account for those specific, contextual aspects that could otherwise undermine the triangulation process. From this perspective, Gee's model appears to be compatible with Silverman's suggestion, because it allowed to interpret the two different sources of data used in the empirical study (the analysis of the online discussions and the interviews) as two differently situated

articulations of recognition work. One articulation is based on the symmetrical relationship between members sharing the same assumptions and engaged in a common discursive endeavour (self-recognition); the other is based on the asymmetrical relationship between the interviewer and the respondents, which brought forward a more “proactive” dimension of identity (see also the conclusive discussion in chapter 5). Following also Holstein and Gulbrium’s suggestions (1997) in relation to qualitative research, I tried in this thesis to view discourse as a situated construction achieved through a reflective relationship established by participants with other participants and by respondents with interviewer.

8.3.2 Generalisation issues

In quantitative research, generalisability is usually achieved through standardised statistical sampling procedures. Unfortunately, these procedures are unavailable in most instances of qualitative inquiry, where data is chosen because of practical reasons of accessibility. Some authors (e.g., Stake, 2000) do not see this as an issue, as they believe that qualitative research should not be concerned with generalising beyond specific cases. Luckily other researchers (e.g., Mason, 1996) do not agree with this view, arguing that qualitative inquiry should strive to propose interpretations with some degree of representativeness. One (controversial) way to add representativeness to qualitative research is through a specific type of sampling, called theoretical sampling.

The notion of theoretical sampling was developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and Strauss and Corbin (1998) as an alternative strategy to statistical sampling (see also Bryman, 2001). While statistical sampling tries to increase the accuracy of the evidence across distributions of people, theoretical sampling tries to discover categories and to refine the interrelationship between ideas and data. According to Mason (1996), theoretical sampling is the selection of groups or categories which are relevant to the research question being explored, and consistent with the theoretical assumptions. Theoretical sampling rests on assumptions which are radically different from those underlying probability sampling. In the first place, not only people are sampled but also events, contexts and time periods. Secondly the aim is not to achieve a representative relationship between a selection and a population, but to produce a framework which is consistent, rich, rigorous, and therefore, credible.

In this thesis, the selection of data was inspired by the notion of theoretical sampling (see chapter 5), but at the same time it was often the result of some kind of compromise. I chose OPSonline (the larger research context) because it was accessible. Within OPSonline, I used theoretical sampling to select one specific discussion room, because it

was the best place to analyse identity and answer the research question. Within the discussion room, I did manage to select a random “sample” of online discussions for the first study, but for the second study I recruited respondents on a completely voluntary basis. Do these choices reduce the degree of representativeness of the findings? I believe that, to a certain extent, they inevitably do. For this reason, it is important to remind the reader that this thesis does not make generalising claims about how young professionals construct a common identity through online discourse. This thesis only attempts to offer some insights into how networking technologies can support the articulation of recognition work in specific situations. On the one hand, these suggestions can be used as a basis for a critical discussion about theoretical issues concerning communities of practice; on the other, they can be seen as an attempt to better understand meaningful participation and discourse in online learning environments.

Furthermore, this thesis does not suggest that in every networked environment participants are involved in recognition work the way Gee describes it (i.e. through the use of situated meanings and cultural models); instead, it does propose the arguably original suggestion that recognition work may take place even online, and that it can be “amplified” in certain circumstances, if some “conditions” are met. What are these conditions? On the basis of the findings emerged in the empirical study, I believe they are mostly concerned with the relationship between “real” contexts and “virtual” ones. More specifically, they are concerned with the capacity of a networked environment to be relevant to the trajectories of identity in meaningful contexts of life, with the capacity to establish significant connections with those areas of controversy and dialogue that impact on personal development.

In this thesis, this referred to the capacity of those involved in the discussion room to use the networked environment as a discursive arena, where the issues, the controversies and doubts which were relevant to them could be explored through a reflective, always accessible repository of asynchronous discussions.

However, these claims need to be substantiated by additional empirical research in different types of networked environments and in different cultural and social contexts. Drawing on Patton (1990), some suggestions as to how to achieve a stronger and more representative interpretation may include the following options, which should be seen as opportunities for further research:

Testing rival explanations, which can be done both inductively and logically. The inductive approach is based on looking for alternative ways to organise the data that might lead to different findings. The logical way is based on identifying other logical possibilities and then testing if those possibilities can be supported by the data.

Deviant cases analysis, which is based on the identification of instances and cases that do not fit in the general pattern. In some cases these may turn out to be exceptions that prove the rule, sometimes they may even contribute to broaden the interpretive framework, in other cases they may cast serious doubts and prompt alternative, sometimes radically different scenarios.

8.4 Conclusive comments

8.4.1 What future for communities of practice?

In this paragraph, I wish to draw attention to one last theoretical question: is the notion of community of practice still useful, or has it been stretched so much, in this thesis as in the whole socio-cultural literature, to the extent that it has become unrecognisable and therefore dismissible? One way to answer this question is by doing something similar to what Jenkins (1992) did in his critical analysis of Pierre Bourdieu's work. Bourdieu (1977, 1984) was a key sociologist whose ideas about practice, power and social capital have influenced a great deal of research and theoretical discussion. His social theory represents an important source of inspiration also for the development of the CoP framework.

Unfortunately, Bourdieu's notoriously difficult exposition style, and a certain tolerance for theoretical inconsistency, left him open to some fierce, and well founded, criticism. Nonetheless, Jenkins acknowledged that it is impossible to ignore the bold and ambitious nature of Bourdieu's theoretical endeavour. Although Bourdieu's attempt to tackle dramatically complex social phenomena was bound to be flawed and incomplete, it raised questions and issues worthy of exploration and discussion. In this sense, criticism represents the "sincerest form of flattery" (Jenkins, 1992, p. 176). As Jenkins suggested, Bourdieu is "enormously stimulating, he is good to think with" (ibid).

I believe that, to a certain extent, the same constructive criticism could be applied to the CoP "theory". Lave and Wenger (1991) and especially Wenger (1998) strived to devise a bold theoretical framework through which an exceedingly wide range of social phenomena could be interpreted. Probably, the most ambitious (and theoretically fragile) idea is that in a post-modern, socially fragmented world, pre-industrial forms of communitarian interaction based on apprenticeships and, in general, on an "existential" view of participation, could be used as the foundation for a "social theory of learning" (Wenger, 2006, p.4). A theory which assumes that communities of practice will emerge in any type of social situation, both in the real and in the virtual world, adapting to different purposes

and assuming different shapes, but still remaining the most “natural”, self-organising way through which people interact with each other.

Interestingly, this is precisely where Bourdieu’s biggest lesson (according to Jenkins) comes to the rescue. At the core of this lesson lies the invitation to consider *any* object of inquiry in social research as a negotiated construction. Bourdieu, Jenkins argued, warned us that it is necessary to be vigilant, in order to avoid the seduction of apparently transparent, common-sensical and universally applicable models and understandings. Notions such as family, culture and, of course, communities of practice are not natural phenomena which occur in unproblematic ways. Theoretical constructs are necessary to read reality, but they are inevitably specific, and each of them

“Is socially constructed within a network of social relations and imbalanced forces of power. Concepts such as these must be used with scepticism (what does this really mean?) And care (what are the theoretical assumptions and implications of using it?)” (Jenkins, 1992, p.176).

This reflective and critical stance can help us see the notion of community of practice as a very useful one, not to be dismissed. A notion that, as it is, has probably exhausted its potential. Nonetheless, it provided us with terms and ideas that have stimulated and keep stimulating critical discussion and research. From this perspective, this thesis’ emphasis on the role of discourse as a pivotal dimension where social identity, language and practice converge, acquires also an additional, meta-theoretical value. Discourse is not only the way through which the inconsistencies of the CoP model can be tackled, it is also the way through which the very notion of community of practice can be conceptualised: as a useful resource that contributes to an ongoing dialogue, encouraging critical reflection and enriching our understanding of learning as a meaningful, complex social activity.

8.4.2 A final summary

In this thesis I have applied James Gee’s ideas about recognition work, and the related model of Discourse Analysis (Gee, 1999; Gee & Green, 1998) to a specific situation - a discussion room within an online forum of young psychology students and professionals - to understand whether (and of course how) identities are constructed and negotiated. The findings showed that members of the discussion room tend to construct themselves (recognise themselves) as peripheral to the “official” professional network of psychologists in Italy, and as engaged in a struggle to achieve full participation and legitimacy. The mutual recognition within the discussion room appeared to be organised around three

thematic areas, each supported by a specific cultural model: Psychology under Threat, Disempowered Psychologists and Psychology and Health. However, the answers provided during semi-structured interviews showed that members of the discussion room also tended to construct themselves, and to be recognised, as alternative to the aforementioned network, and as working for the “rejuvenation” of an old and flawed system. Overall, the online discussions and the interviews reflect two different moments of “recognition work”.

The study provides empirically grounded evidence that Gee’s model can be a valuable tool to analyse processes of identity construction in networked contexts. Gee’s emphasis on the importance of language as social action, and his focus on identity as a pivotal dimension in education and learning, are instrumental to a much needed revision of the CoP framework, which is dangerously slipping towards oversimplification and popularisation (see also Schwen & Hara, 2004). The concept of recognition work can help us account for a wide range of phenomena within, but most importantly *across*, communities of practice and larger networks, expanding some of the concept’s underdeveloped but insightful aspects, and filling the theoretical gap regarding the active and mutually constructive relationship between language, practice and identity.

By highlighting the issues of the CoP model and presenting evidence of the importance of identity construction as a dimension of learning, this thesis offers some insights for further theoretical development of the socio-cultural approach. In particular, the findings suggest that in the light of current social and technological changes we need to define a complex and flexible model to investigate how people use networking technologies to support personal, non-linear trajectories of identity and membership. This is also in tune with the idea according to which ICTs allow, at least on a purely technical level, for increased and more personal participation in the democratic process and in the production of knowledge (Green et al., 2005; Hague & Loader, 1999).

In fact, some of the evidence presented in this thesis (see chapter 7) suggests that the intrinsic nature of an open, networked CMC environment might facilitate what Gee calls “C-conversations”, i.e. the *intertextual* (Bakhtin, 1986; Kristeva, 1980) interaction and the mutual influence between different Discourses and identities. The question of whether this aspect of CMC could be harnessed to create intertextual online environments where individuals can reflectively, and positively, engage in some aspects of “recognition work”, is again an opportunity for further, I believe relevant, research. From this perspective, the current evolution of the Internet towards “social networking communities”, where people can join groups, share interests and user-generated content, thus creating bonds in increasingly personalised ways (the so called Web 2.0), represents an exciting opportunity

for educational researchers. These contexts, which cannot be studied “from the outside” but necessitates a deep and inclusive analysis of the meanings shared by those involved, can shed further light on the relationship between identity and learning, helping to unearth its potential for encouraging theoretical development and informing educational strategies.

In conclusion, I wish to highlight that this thesis’ main assumptions have much in common with post-modernist and post-structuralist approaches to discourse and identity, in particular the notion of discourse as a shared, multifaceted social practice, and the idea that our identities and our social realities are constructed and negotiated in a dialogic activity. However, the importance of agency in Gee’s framework constitutes a sound alternative to the hyper-relativistic impasse of some of the afore-mentioned approaches, and it certainly holds a much greater potential from an educational perspective. In fact, learning research cannot do without the concept of agency or, put in other words, without the firm belief that people are not continuously shifting in the situational flow of subject positions and multiple identities, driven by ideology and power, but retain some degree of “control” over themselves, and deliberately “learn to be someone” through words and deeds. Probably, the main contribution this thesis could give to an “ontological” approach to learning and education is that it is both possible and urgent to help people, in ways that future research should identify and test, to construct positive identities as full participant members of their peer-groups, their communities of practice and, ultimately, their societies.

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